

**Attitudes and geographical variation  
in the use of pragmatic particles in Faroese:  
The case of *sært tú*, *hojr(ir) tú*, *skilir tú* and *veitst tú***

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**Abstract:**

The study presents the results of a preliminary investigation of the use of a number of pragmatic particles in Faroese: *sært tú* ‘you see’, *hojr(ir) tú* ‘listen’, *skilir tú* ‘you understand’, and *veitst tú* ‘y’know’. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews and analyzed in relation to the social variable settlement. Data were collected from the five settlements of Tórshavn, Sandur, Tvøroyri, Klaksvík, and Fuglafjørður. The study found geographical variation in the use of the pragmatic particles and discusses the attitudes people in the Faroe Islands have towards the use of pragmatic particles.

This paper presents the results of a questionnaire-based study on pragmatic particles<sup>2</sup> in Faroese. The particles that will be focused on are *sært tú* ‘you see’, *hojr(ir) tú* ‘listen’, *skilir tú* ‘you understand’ and *veitst tú* ‘y’know’. Similar particles are used in other Germanic languages such as English (*y’know*), Icelandic (*þú veist* ‘you know’, *heyrðu* ‘listen’), and Swedish (*ser du* ‘you see’, *hör du* ‘listen’, *förstår du* ‘you understand’ and *vet du* ‘you know’).

Expressions which are classified as pragmatic particles do not form their own word class in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, enclitic forms (*-han/hän* in Finnish), adverbs (*nú* ‘now’ in Icelandic), conjunctions and phrases (*y’know* and *isn’t it*) can in certain contexts take the form of a pragmatic particle (cf. Foolen 1995). The expressions which are the subject of this study consist of finite verbs followed by the personal pronoun *tú* ‘you’.

Pragmatic particles can have various kinds of functions in an interaction. By using particles, speakers can express attitudes and feelings or elicit responses from the interlocutors, for example with summons. Hilmisdóttir includes Icelandic *heyrðu* in a group of summons (Hilmisdóttir 2007: 47; cf. ISK 2004), which are used to get someone’s attention or signal that the speaker wishes to leave the conversation (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). Pragmatic particles

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Helga Hilmisdóttir for comments.

<sup>2</sup> The term pragmatic particle is the traditional term and is used by e.g. Östman (1981). Pragmatic particles have also been referred to in other studies as *discourse particles* (e.g. Schiffrin 1987).

in my investigation (*heyrðu, sært tú*) can be included in the same group because they are often used to get the interlocutor's attention. From a syntactic point of view, pragmatic particles are not compulsory. However, from a pragmatic point of view, particles add an interpersonal dimension to an utterance. As Östman (1981) points out, particles interact with different linguistic phenomena such as intonation, tense, and modality. In other words, a speaker may convey a similar message using a particular kind of prosody or by employing a pragmatic particle. Particles are primarily used to regulate speech and to ease the flow of conversation (Lindström 2008: 65). The meanings of discourse particles seem to vary but it is always "related to the management of turn-taking and the achievement of mutual understanding of the course of interaction" (Lindström and Wide 2005: 213).

Many pragmatic expressions have a different meaning which depends on the context and situations in which they are used. Hence, it can be difficult to analyze them without a context (Östman 1981: 16; Foolen 1996).

This study is inspired by Lindström and Wide's (2005) diachronic study of the Swedish discourse particles *ser du* 'do you see', *hör du* 'do you hear', *förstår du* 'do you understand', and *vet du* 'do you know'. Lindström and Wide (2005: 232) compare these particles to English *you know*. In their study, they show how these phrases went through a grammaticalization process during the eighteenth century. Lindström (2008: 81) uses alternative spellings (*ser du*>*serdu*, *hör du*>*hördu*, *förstår du*>*förstårdu* and *vet du*>*vetdu*) to illustrate that these expressions are more or less grammaticalized and that they do not convey the same semantic meaning as the corresponding propositional phrases.

Lindström and Wide (2005: 214) also consider the part of the sentence these particles appear in. When discourse particles are utterance-initial they can be used as interjections or summonses. Sometimes particles can be used sentence-internally. In these cases, in speech, the particle can indicate hesitation, insecurity or it might interrupt the clausal syntactic progression of the utterance/sentence. Particles which are placed sentence-finally are often used to ensure the interlocutor has understood a prior question. In my data, the pragmatic particles are placed sentence-initially, sentence-internally and sentence-finally (cf. Foolen 1996).

The aims are twofold. Firstly, I will compare the results of interviews regarding the acceptability of sentences that contain pragmatic particles in different syntactic positions. Secondly, I will investigate whether there are any differences in the results which could be explained by the geographical origin of the informants.

The article is organized as follows. I firstly introduce my data and methods. Then, I present the results of my investigation. I compare the results for the

different particles in the different syntactic positions. Then I make a geographical comparison and discuss whether there are any differences in the attitudes towards the particles by the speakers from different settlements. Finally, the report ends with a discussion.

## 1. Data and methods

The data were collected during fieldwork in five different settlements in the Faroe Islands in August 2008: Tórshavn (T), Sandur (S), Tvøroyri (Tv), Klaksvík (K), and Fuglafjørður (F). The aim was to include an equal distribution between three social categories: a) gender, b) age, and c) settlement. However, in this study I concentrate only on the category of settlement. The settlements are situated with Klaksvík and Fuglafjørður in the north of the Faroe Islands, Tórshavn and Sandur in the middle and Tvøroyri in the South of the Faroe Islands (see the map to the right).

I interviewed 38 people in total. In each village, I interviewed eight people: half of my informants were men and half were women. However, in Tvøroyri, only three men and three women were interviewed. Unfortunately, it proved to be difficult to reach an equal distribution in age. The age of the informants included in the research varies from 15 to 70 years and the average age is around 38 years. The average age of women is approximately 33 years and 43 for the men.

The interviews were done on an individual basis. The instructions were given in Swedish and occasionally in English to make sure that the informants understood what they were expected to do. The informants used both a mixed Scandinavian language and Faroese during the interviews. In cases of communication problems, older people seemed to prefer mixed Scandinavian while the younger people preferred English.

The questionnaire was in Faroese and informants were asked to read eleven sentences aloud. The sentences were supposed to illustrate part of a normal conversation, a natural speech act, as much as possible. By asking the informants to read the examples aloud, the intention was to make the situation more real-life-like for the informants to test if they could use these particles in their own speech. The questionnaire offered three alternative answers: a) *í lagi* ‘okay’, b) *ivasamt*



‘doubtful’ and c) *nei* ‘no’. The questionnaire included sentences that all contained one of the following pragmatic particles: *sært tú*, *hojr(ir) tú*, *skilir tú*, or *veitst tú*.

The sentences used in the study are listed below with their English translations:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Jú, jú, tað gongur væl, <i>sært tú</i> .                          | 1. Yeah, yeah, that goes really well, <i>you see</i> .          |
| 2. Tú, eg havi billettir til konsertina í morgin, <i>hojrir tú</i> . | 2. You, I have tickets to the concert tomorrow, <i>listen</i> . |
| 3. Eg eri illa til passar, <i>skilir tú</i> .                        | 3. I am not feeling well, <i>you understand</i> .               |
| 4. <i>Hoyr tú</i> , gev mær ein mjólkardropa.                        | 4. <i>Listen</i> , give me some milk.                           |
| 5. Eg fekk ilt, <i>veitst tú</i> .                                   | 5. I felt pain, <i>y’know</i> .                                 |
| 6. Tað bar ikki til at fiska, <i>veitst tú</i> .                     | 6. It was not possible to fish, <i>y’know</i> .                 |
| 7. Fanin, <i>veitst tú</i> , at alt skal vera so dýrt.               | 7. Damn, <i>y’know</i> , everything is so expensive.            |
| 8. <i>Hoyr tú</i> , hann sjálvur, øs teg ikki so, tað kavar.         | 8. <i>Listen</i> , take it easy it is snowing.                  |
| 9. Eg drekki mjólk, <i>sært tú</i> .                                 | 9. I drink milk, <i>you understand</i> .                        |
| 10. Hygg, har <i>sært tú</i> , Jesus er ikki til!                    | 10. Look, here <i>you see</i> , Jesus does not exist.           |
| 11. <i>Sært tú</i> , hendingin í gjár var ræðulig.                   | 11. <i>You see</i> , the incident yesterday was awful.          |

Informants marked their answers on the questionnaire themselves. The interviews were also audio-recorded in case I needed to later check details of pronunciation. However, in this study I will concentrate only on the written answers.

A few sentences that I had translated from Swedish into Faroese were not successful for various social and cultural reasons. One sentence used the expletive *fanin* ‘damn’. The reactions of the informants suggest that the word has a more offensive meaning in Faroese than in Swedish. I asked the people who had negative reactions to the word to replace it with another word that felt better. Some of the women in particular refused to read these sentences aloud. Another sentence was imported directly from a Faroese chat room: *Hygg, har sær tú, Jesus er ikki til!*<sup>3</sup>. Also here I replaced the name Jesus with another word (typically with ‘troll’ or ‘that’) during the interviews to avoid potentially difficult situations for my informants.

Altogether, the questionnaire contained eleven sentences: Four of the sentences contained the pragmatic particle *sært tú*, three of them *hojr(ir) tú*, another three showed instances of *veitst tú*, and, finally, one sentence contained an instance of *skilir tú*. This unequal distribution between the different types of

<sup>3</sup> The pragmatic particle *sært tú* has other functions in this sentence than in the examples in which it appears by itself. But because it was challenging to find authentic examples I decided to include this example in my investigation.

pragmatic particles makes a straightforward comparison between the different uses of these particles difficult, but some general comments can be made.

Before using my questionnaire, I did a small pilot study with a few native speakers of Faroese to make sure the sentences were as authentic as possible. Interestingly, none of the informants indicated any problems with the words that turned out to cause difficulties in the subsequent interviews.

## 2. Acceptability and syntactic position

The sentences the informants were asked to respond to contained pragmatic particles in three different syntactic positions: 1) sentence-initially, 2) sentence-internally, and, 3) sentence-finally. In the following sections, I will discuss the results of the interviews with respect to the syntactic position of the particles.

### 2.1. *sært tú* ‘you see’

The first pragmatic particle that was tested during the interview was *sært tú*. The informants were given four different sentences which included this particle. Two of them contained a sentence-final *sært tú* (sentences 1 and 9), one sentence contained a sentence-internal instance (sentence 10), and in one instance the particle occurred in a sentence-initial position (sentence 11). Table 1 shows the examples and the responses from the informants.

Table 1. *Sært tú*.

		Yes	Unsure	No	N
Sentence 1	Jú, jú, tað gongur væl, sært tú.	24	7	7	38
Sentence 9	Eg drekki mjólk, sært tú.	22	6	10	38
Sentence 10	Hygg, har sært tú, Jesus er ikki til!	33	4	1	38
Sentence 11	Sært tú, hendingin í gjár var ræðulig.	19	10	9	38

As Table 1 shows, the particle *sært tú* is more likely to be accepted when it occurs sentence-internally. During the interview I gave more context to sentence 10 because of the name Jesus in the sentence and this may have influenced the informants’ attitudes towards the use of *sært tú*. This sentence also contained an utterance-initial *hygg* ‘look’ which may have skewed the result for this sentence. When *sært tú* was employed utterance-initially, it was accepted less frequently, i.e. only by half of the informants.

It seems that informants evaluated the sentences containing the pragmatic particle *sært tú* the most positively of all of the particles tested in the questionnaire list they read during the interview. The most frequently accepted

sentence was sentence 10, although a few interviewees reacted to the semantic meaning of the sentence. Only one interviewee said that it was not possible to use that sentence. Sentence 1, *Jú, jú, tað gongur væl, sært tú* was also accepted by many interviewees. Out of 38 informants, 24 claimed that they would be able to use that particular sentence in their own speech. Seven informants answered that they were unsure or that they could not use the sentence. Sentence number 9 also contained *sært tú* in a sentence-final position: *Eg drekki mjólk, sært tú*. Out of 38 informants, 22 said they could use this kind of sentence in their speech.

## 2.2. *hojr(ir) tú* ‘listen’

The results of the interviews indicate that the use of the pragmatic particle *hojr(ir) tú* is not as widely accepted as *sært tú*, especially not in sentence-final position. Table 2 shows the result of the test.

Table 2. *Hoyr(ir) tú*.

		Yes	Unsure	No	N
Sentence 2	Tú, eg havi billettir til konsertina í morgin, hoyrir tú.	15	6	17	38
Sentence 4	Hoyr tú, gev mær ein mjólkardropa.	17	13	8	38
Sentence 8	Hoyr tú, hann sjálvur, øs teg ikki so, tað kavar.	17	11	10	38

In sentence 2, the pragmatic particle was placed sentence-finally. 17 interviewees evaluated this sentence as unacceptable and 15 as acceptable. When *hojr(ir) tú* was employed sentence-initially, 17 of 38 evaluated it as acceptable in their own speech. Unsure and negative answers were in both cases almost equal in numbers. Out of 38 informants, 11 were uncertain and 10 gave a negative answer.

## 2.3. *veitst tú* ‘you know’

The third pragmatic particle that was tested was *veitst tú* ‘you know.’ Table 3 shows the results of the interviews.

Table 3. *Veitst tú.*

		Yes	Unsure	No	N
Sentence 5	Eg fekk ilt, veitst tú.	18	8	12	38
Sentence 6	Tað bar ikki til at fiska, veitst tú.	17	9	11	37
Sentence 7	Fanin, veitst tú, at alt skal vera so dýrt.	12	6	20	38

As can be seen in Table 3, two of the sentences used in the interview contained *veist tú* in a sentence-final position (5, 6) and one sentence contained an instance employed sentence-internally. Sentence 5 was accepted by 18 informants and sentence 6 was accepted by 17 informants. That means that more than half of the informants accepted the sentence-final use of *veitst tú*. As I noted earlier, sentence 7 is problematic because it starts with the exclamative *fanin*. That might have influenced how some informants reacted to the sentence. The *fanin* in the beginning of the sentence makes the sentence difficult to analyze, if *veitstu tú* is sentence-internal or sentence-initial. The results still indicate that *veitst tú* is more likely to be accepted in Faroese when it is used sentence-finally.

#### 2.4. *skilir tú* ‘you understand’

The last pragmatic particle included in the study is *skilir tú*. Table 4 shows the results of the interviews.

Table 4. *Skilir tú.*

		Yes	Unsure	No	N
Sentence 3	Eg eri illa til passar, skilir tú.	23	3	12	38

As Table 4 shows, *skilir tú* appeared only once in my questionnaire. The instance occurred sentence-finally. Around two thirds of the informants (23/38) evaluated this sentence as acceptable.

One methodological problem in the study is that the pragmatic particles are not tested in all positions, which makes analyzing, or at least comparison of the results, challenging. The results show that certain pragmatic particles are not used or acceptable for the informants and one reason for this is clearly a lack of examples.

### 3. Geographical variation of pragmatic particles

It is difficult to make any strong claims about the geographical variation of the particles *sært tú*, *hoyr(ir) tú*, *skilir tú* and *veitst tú* based on the present data since

the number of informants is low and the linguistic samples are limited to 11 sentences. Nonetheless, in this section, I will try to analyze the data from a geographical perspective. Table 5 shows the results of the interviews and how the different answers are distributed between the different settlements. The table only gives raw frequencies, since this is a preliminary study with very few informants. Thus I have not seen it fit to present the data in percentages or even as averages at this stage.

Table 5. Geographical variation.

	Klaksvík			Fuglafjørður			Tórshavn			Sandur			Tvøroyri		
	N=8			N=8			N=8			N=8			N=6		
	Y	?	N	Y	?	N	Y	?	N	Y	?	N	Y	?	N
1 sært tú	7	0	1	5	0	3	3	3	2	5	3	0	4	1	1
9 sært tú	2	2	4	5	0	3	6	1	1	5	2	1	4	1	1
10 sært tú	8	0	0	7	1	0	8	0	0	5	3	0	5	0	1
11 sært tú	4	2	2	5	3	0	4	2	2	4	2	2	2	1	3
2 hoyr(ir) tú	3	3	2	2	2	5	2	4	2	7	1	0	3	1	1
4 hoyr(ir) tú	3	3	2	0	3	5	7	1	0	4	4	0	3	2	1
8 hoyr(ir) tú	7	0	1	2	0	6	3	3	2	3	2	3	0	1	5
5 veitst tú	4	1	3	2	3	3	5	1	2	4	1	3	3	2	1
6 veitst tú	4	0	4	1	2	5	5	2	0	4	2	2	3	3	0
7 veitst tú	1	2	5	1	1	6	1	2	5	4	1	3	5	0	1
3 skilir tú	3	2	3	4	0	4	7	0	1	6	1	1	3	0	3

### 3.1. *sært tú* ‘you see’

Sentence 1 has the highest acceptance rate in Klaksvík and sentence 10 (*Hygg, har sært tú, Jesus er ikki til!*) both in Klaksvík and in Tórshavn. Sentence 9 (*Eg drekki mjólk, sært tú*) is less acceptable in Klaksvík. In Klaksvík there are more negative answers than in the other settlements. Sentence 11 (*Sært tú, hendingin í gjár var ræðulig*) gives fewer positive answers and the most negative answers in Tvøroyri and in Fuglafjørður.

### 3.2. *hojr(ir) tú* ‘listen’

Sentence 2 (*Tú, eg havi billettir til konsertina í morgin, hojr(ir) tú*) was accepted most frequently in Sandur. Only one informant was unsure whether it was possible to produce such a sentence while other informants gave positive answers. This sentence received the most negative answers in Fuglafjørður. Sentence 4 (*Hoyr tú, gev mær ein mjólkardropa*) had the highest number of positive answers in Tórshavn and the lowest in Fuglafjørður. As far as sentence 8 is concerned (*Hoyr tú, hann sjálvur, øs teg ikki so, tað kavur*) Klaksvík has the highest proportion of positive answers, while Fuglafjørður and Tvøroyri had the lowest.

### 3.3. *veitst tú* ‘you know’

For sentence 5 there is very little difference between the settlements, but the two other sentences that contain *veitst tú* show some differences. Fuglafjørður differs from the other villages in respect to sentence 6. This sentence has the highest proportion of negative answers. In Klaksvík, the proportion between the positive and the negative answers is equal. In Fuglafjørður there are the fewest number of positive answers and the most negative answers. In Tórshavn and in Tvøroyri there are no negative answers at all. As far as sentence 7 *Fanin, veitst tú, at alt skal vera so dýrt* is concerned, informants in Tvøroyri evaluated it as acceptable in their speech. In Sandur, the results seem to be the same, but in the three other settlements the results show the opposite: negative answers are in majority.

### 3.4. *skilir tú* ‘you understand’

When we look at how informants evaluated sentence 3, we can see that, in Tórshavn and Sandur, informants have evaluated the sentence as acceptable. In other villages informants are unsure of the acceptability of the sentence.

## 4. Discussion

According to these data, *skilir tú* and *sært tú* are used more frequently in Faroese than the other pragmatic particles (*hojr(ir) tú, veitst tú*). As I commented earlier in this study, pragmatic particles are syntactically unnecessary; the informants also commented on the use of these particles. According to them, some of the particles in the questionnaire are unnecessary in Faroese. It is common for speakers to have a negative attitude towards the use of pragmatic particles, and, therefore, to produce these kinds of comments about them. Pragmatic particles are usually used in conversation and seldom in written text. Researchers (Longacre 1976; Mansour 1985 in Foolen 1995) have tried to explain the role the particles have in speech. The function of pragmatic particles can be explained on the interpersonal level and not on the semantic level. Pragmatic particles are indeed

syntactically non-obligatory. In studies where native speakers of the language were asked to explain texts containing pragmatic particles, they found it difficult to do so (cf. Mansour 1985 in Foolen 1995). Pragmatic particles do have a meaning but it is usually very difficult to pinpoint, since their meaning depends on the context. My data were taken partly from the Internet and the sentences were presented to the informants without any context. This could be one of the reasons for their comments. Furthermore, it is difficult to comment on a written version of spoken language, which does not follow the same rules as written language (see Lindström 2008:14). This kind of research is also demanding for the informants because it is difficult to evaluate your own language use.

Because the fieldwork took place in different parts of the Faroe Islands, it is possible to look for geographical variation in the use of pragmatic particles. The Faroe Islands are geographically separated and certain variation in the use of the particles can be noted. The most northerly settlements were in Klaksvík and in Fuglafjørður. The settlements investigated in the south were in Sandur, in Tvøroyri, and there are differences in using pragmatic particles there, as my results shows.

There are signs of geographical variation in my material, but with such limited data it is difficult to make any strong claims about the geographical variation. The variation that can be noted in my data could be explained as personal variation rather than dialectal variation. However, one thing that sets Sandur apart from the other islands was the pronunciation of *sært tú*. Many interviewees in Sandur commented on the pronunciation of that particle and that can surely be a geographical and a dialectal difference.

It would be an interesting future challenge to continue this research and to see how much and in what way these particles are used in informal spoken conversation. I see it as necessary to complement such a sociolinguistic study based on interviews with a functional study based on spoken data. My study was a short study based on written Faroese. In the future, these preliminary results will be compared with spoken data in order to evaluate the feasibility of working with questionnaires.

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