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Conditional connection explored: the case of Sicilian *cusà*

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Abstract: Stemming from a *wh*-question, the Sicilian marker *cusà* (*cu sa* ‘who knows’) expresses several epistemic meanings, which can also reach the realm of conditionality. The paper explores the discourse profile of *cusà* as it emerges from the analysis of diachronic data (from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and present-day informal Sicilian, namely spoken Sicilian and present-day informal Sicilian as written by speakers on the web. These data suggest a possible path of development leading from the *wh*-question to new functions. We propose that the origin of this development can be explained in the light of the strategy of the “impossible question”, while the diverse functions of *cusà* emerged through concomitant processes of desemantization, reanalysis, and subjectification.

Keywords: conditionals; connectives; discourse markers; epistemicity; modal adverbs

1 Introduction

The present paper contributes to the analysis of the marker *cusà* in Sicilian, an Italo-Romance variety spoken in the extreme south of Italy.¹ Literally meaning ‘who knows’ (*wh*-question marker followed by third-person singular present tense form of ‘know’; compare Spanish *quiza(s)*, ancient Portuguese *quiça*, English *who knows*, Dutch *wie weet*; De Smet and Van de Velde 2013; Houle and Martínez Gómez 2011; Ramat and Ricca 1998), *cusà* has been defined as an adverb, an interjection, or a conjunction (Piccitto and Tropea 1977). Fortuna (2002: 61) considers it to be a modal adverb on a par with *fuorsi* ‘maybe’. Bianchi and Cruschina (2020) define *cusà* as a marker of ignorance. Synchronically, it expresses commitment modulation and conditional meanings in different contexts with slightly different nuances. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the process whereby an original interrogative *wh*-clause including the predicate *sapere* ‘to know’ develops into a *conditional dubitative connective*, a *dubitative adverb*, and a *discourse marker* (cf. Hopper and Traugott 2003; Heine et al. 1991).

The range of functions expressed by *cusà* will be explored by seeking to verify: (1) how these functions are connected to the notion of epistemicity; (2) whether the conditional and discursive values may be traced back to the epistemic function of the adverb *cusà*, which expresses eventuality (Mauri and Sansò 2014); and (3) whether the answers to (1) and (2) suggest a diachronic basis for the functions, and if so, through which possible mechanisms of change.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 sketches the theoretical background on which the analysis is based, providing a definition of epistemicity, referring to Dancygier’s (1998) and Lombardi Vallauri’s (1999) classifications of conditionals, and also furnishing some hints around the emergence of discourse functions (Traugott 2020). Section 3 presents the results of the analysis conducted on both synchronic (mainly present-

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day informal Sicilian as written by speakers on the web and, to a lesser extent, face-to-face conversation) and diachronic data. Sections 4 and 5 summarize the main findings of the study and include some final remarks.

2 From conditional meanings to epistemic and pragmatic functions: theoretical premises

Cusà expresses epistemic functions. In dealing with these functions, we will refer to Nuyts's (2001: 21) definition of epistemicity as "the evaluation of the chances that a certain hypothetical state of affairs under consideration (of some aspect of it) will occur, is occurring or has occurred in a possible world". *Cusà* with a meaning of indicating ignorance has been classified by Bianchi and Cruschina (2020) in terms of epistemicity.

In the development of epistemic functions, it seems worth mentioning the strategy of the "impossible question", which should be considered as a source strategy for the development of the various functions of *cusà*. We refer to studies such as De Smet and Van de Velde (2013) on Dutch *wie weet* 'who knows', a marker that introduces an indirect question in which the speaker rhetorically invites the hearer to answer an impossible question. Since no one can answer the question, a function of epistemic suspension emerges, from which diverse discursive nuances may develop.

Along with conveying epistemic meanings, *cusà* has connective functions that require exploring the notion of conditionality. We define conditionality as follows by adapting the definition provided by Traugott (1985): conditionality is an "if *P* then *Q*" relationship (where *P* is the background or frame which must be presumed to hold if *Q* is to be true). Specifically, we will mainly refer to the non-predictive speech act conditionals and to the meta-discursive conditionals as described by Dancygier (1998). In the former type – for example, *cusà pirdisti i chiavi, pigghiati a me bicicletta* ('if you've lost your car keys, take my bike') – the protasis (*P*) does not express conditions of appropriateness or felicity nor does it constitute grounds for prediction; rather it spells out "the circumstances which prompt the speaker into performing the speech acts in question" (Dancygier 1998: 141). In the latter type – for example, *cusà hai pititto, ci sunnu viscotta* ('if you are hungry, there are some cookies') – the protasis expresses the condition to be satisfied to make the event encoded in the apodosis (*Q*) acquire pragmatic relevance. Such a condition is not put against the content of the main clause, but against the performative act projected by the former (Dancygier 1998: 141). In other words, *P* justifies the speaker's utterance of the speech act carried out in *Q* (Lombardi Vallauri 1999: 98). Differently from predictive conditionals (Dancygier 1998: 25) of the type *si si mette a chioviri, a partita a cancellano* ('if it rains (*P*), the match will be canceled (*Q*)'), in this case *P* does not logically precede *Q* and does not affect the realization of *Q*. The relation between *P* and *Q* is placed on the level of pragmatic relevance, rather than on the level of the propositional content. It is a relation between an act and the justification of its utterance.

Markers connected with the domains of epistemicity may develop discourse functions related to the speaker's intersubjective stance (Beeching 2017), such as politeness and irony. Discourse markers (henceforth, DMs) do not contribute to the propositional level. Rather, they are pragmatic cues that serve to interpret and contextualize the propositional level by virtue of their multifunctional and non-compositional character, as well as their positional mobility with respect to the host (Traugott 2020: 17).

3 The discourse profile of *cusà* in Sicilian: from early to late attestations

In what follows, we will present the various functions of *cusà* as observed from the earliest to the latest attestations. Data have been collected from different sources:

- For diachronic data, we surveyed the Corpus Artesia (Archivio Testuale del Siciliano Antico, 2020, containing texts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), Giovanni Meli's and Domenico Tempio's work (eighteenth century, 1814), and Giuseppe Pitre's collection of tales and folk stories (nineteenth century). This survey (which should not be considered definitive) did not show occurrences of *cusà* before the eighteenth century.

- For present-day Sicilian, we used data from the itTenTen corpus (itTenTen16, 2016) hosted on the platform Sketch Engine, websites found through Google searches, and Facebook. Moreover, we included some examples used in face-to-face conversations and collected by the authors of the paper.

The data show that, at the functional-semantic level, the common denominator of *cusà*'s functions is the expression of *eventuality*.² To express this notion, *cusà* ranges from connective to adverbial functions, which are sometimes pragmatically motivated. These functions are outlined in the following sections.

3.1 The functions of *cusà* through time

3.1.1 Opaque rhetorical question

As mentioned, the first attestations of *cusà* that we found are in Meli's work, in the eighteenth century. Here *cusà* may head partial (*wh-*) and polar (*if*) questions with mere rhetorical value, as in (1a) and (1b):³

- (1) a. ***Cu' sa, cu' sa, sta sira unni ti scura;*** (Meli 1839: *La Fata Galanti*, 1, lines 4–6)
 'Who knows who knows/I don't know where you're spending the night'
 b. ***Cu' sa, cu' sa s'annu a scanciariti pri mulu;*** (Meli 1839: *La Fata Galanti*, 1, lines 4–6)
 'Who knows who knows/I don't know if they're confusing you with a mule'

Both (1a) and (1b) convey epistemic values. In (1a), the speaker is uncertain where the hearer will spend the night. In (1b), the uncertainty is around the possibility that some people are confusing the hearer with a mule. The question addressed by the speaker to the hearer is impossible to answer. It has the merely rhetorical role of expressing *epistemic suspension* (De Smet and Van de Velde 2013). In (1a), the commitment modulation refers to the identity of the referent saturating the *wh-* variable (*unni* 'where'). In (1b) it refers to the possible realization of the state of affairs; therefore, the doubt concerns the propositional level. As shown for Dutch *wie weet*, syntactically the whole structure made up of *cusà* plus the interrogative dependent clause forms an interrogative sentence. Nonetheless, on the pragmatic ground, the structure rarely behaves as a real question. Rather, it is used to achieve specific communicative effects⁴ related to the removal of commitment (De Smet and Van de Velde 2013: 540).

3.1.2 Dubitative adverb

In Meli's work, *cusà* also behaves as an adverb generically meaning 'in case' (eventuality), as seen in (2); it refers to a generic and unexpressed condition of possibility or necessity that makes the content occurring with *cusà* possible (Visconti 2000: 124).

- (2) *Pirchì dunca ssu 'nnuccenti*
Nun vuliti cumpatiri?
Ah chhiù guai e cchiù sospiri
Pruviriti vui cusà! ... (Meli, Canzuni XXVII)
 'Why, then, don't you want to sympathize with this innocent person? **In that case**, you could get more trouble and more sighs ...'

² The notion is defined based on Mauri and Sansò (2014: 109) with respect to *casomai*: "As a complex conditional connective [...], *caso mai* [...] roughly means 'in case'."

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own.

⁴ It is possible to express *real* questions employing *cusà*, as can be seen in the following example: ***Cu' lu sapi ca vui aviti tri figghi? faciti cuntu ca nn'aviti dui*** (Pitrè 1985: I, XLII) 'Who (it) knows that you have three daughters? Pretend that you only have two.' To express a real question, the clitic *lu* 'it' is inserted between *cu* and the full form *sapi*.

In this case, *cusà* is directly linked to the expressed content *Q*, leaving content *P* on the implicit level: *P* refers to a generic and unexpressed condition of possibility or necessity that makes *Q* possible (Visconti 2000: 124). The lack of an explicit *P* headed by *cusà* suggests that the original predicate ‘to know’ has undergone semantic bleaching, shifting from “knowledge” (whose object was the content of *P*) to speaker’s commitment. In other words, *cusà* developed an epistemic, complex adverbial status through subjectification and desemantization (see Thompson and Mulac [1991] on *I think*). The relation may be summarized as *cusà* (*P*) → *Q*, where *P* is placed in parentheses since it is to be retrieved from the implicit level.

3.1.3 Dubitative connective

The plain emergence of connective functions related to conditional meanings can be observed in the following example, where *cusà* may be paraphrased as *if* in non-predictive constructions:

- (3) **Cu’ sa** aviti bisognu di mia, arditì ‘na pinna di chisti (Pitrè 1985: I, 391)
 ‘If you have need of me, just burn one of the feathers’

The first attestation of connective functions in our data set is not before Pitrè (1985: I, 391) in the nineteenth century. Moving to the explanation of the value, as Dancygier (1998: 141) has noted, the protasis of non-predictive conditionals does not constitute logically and sequentially ordered preconditions before the realization of *Q*. Rather, the protasis makes explicit the circumstances which lead the speaker to utter the speech acts contained in the apodosis. In (3), the request utterance in *Q* is conversationally justified by the possibility that the hearer may need the speaker’s help. Such a possibility is expressed in *P* and represents the circumstance that allows the speaker to utter her own request.

3.2 The latest stage: present-day data

All the above-mentioned functions are attested in present-day Sicilian—the opaque rhetorical question (1a, b), the dubitative adverb (2), and the dubitative connective (3); therefore we will not comment further on these functions. The following sections will be dedicated to other nuances and values observed in the work of Pitrè and/or in the present-day language.

3.2.1 Adverb towards connective functions

In (4), *cusà* is placed between a clause containing a directive speech act (*mi lu dicissi a mia*) and an indirect interrogative clause introduced by *si* ‘if’. The example is similar to (5); however, it shows co-occurrence between *cusà* and *si* ‘if’, whereas in example (5), *cusà* “absorbs” the subordinating value conveyed by *si*.

- (4) *Signuri, mi lu dicissi a mia: cu’ sa si lu pozzu ajutari ...* (Pitrè 1985: II, 162)
 ‘Sir, just let me know: if **maybe** I can help you’

Cusà is used to strengthen the dubitative value of the *if*-clause, also contributing a nuance of eventuality. *Cusà* depicts the target content as a *possible* event, whose realization/felicity depends on the preceding clause (if the speaker tells the hearer the problem, *maybe/there is a chance* that the hearer may help the former solve the problem). Therefore, *cusà* acquires discursive relevance. At the syntactical level, *cusà* occupies medial position, which has probably triggered its reinterpretation as a connective (see the ellipsis of *if* in (5) below). It may be hypothesized that medial position (between two clauses that are conceptually connected) in co-occurrence with *if* may have triggered the conditional connective functions.

In (4), the co-occurrence of *cusà* and *si* ‘if’ allows an epistemic interpretation, based on which *si* attracts all the subordinating potential. In (5), we can see that *cusà* – despite maintaining the adverbial function of possibility – absorbs the potential of *si* ‘if’. In addition, the deletion of *si* can be interpreted as a clue to the functional compatibility with the conditional connective function:

- (5) *curreu a circari a mastru Juseppi; cu' sa era ancora ddà vicinu* (Pitrè 1985: II, 428–429)
 '[They] ran around looking for Master Joseph **on the chance** that he might still be nearby.'

We suggest that this medial position between two conceptually connected clauses may have triggered the development of the conditional connective functions.

In terms of the dubitative adverbial functions, the epistemic function may involve specific acts, where *cusà* expresses intersubjective reality:

- (6) *Bona gintuzzi cusà aviti vistu un picciridru di rari biddrizzi* (<http://web.tiscali.it/gervasiditrapani/tuppuliata.htm>, accessed 20 May 2022)
 'Gentle sir, have you **by chance/maybe** seen a wonderful baby around here?'

Example (6) shows that from the core meaning of a dubitative adverb, *cusà* has developed into a DM (with a meaning of 'maybe', 'on the chance'), as it is hosted by an interrogative clause conveying a question. *Cusà* mitigates the question, based on the presupposition of a reference to possibility. The speaker foregrounds the reference to possibility, thus leaving space to answer the question.

3.2.2 Conditional connective with meta-discursive conditionals

In terms of its connective functions, *cusà* as conditional connective may also occur in the configuration in (7):

- (7) *Cusà ti serbi un cavettu, c'è un negozio di pc* (face-to-face conversation, Palermo, Sicily, 17 March 2019)
 'If you need a cable, there's a computer store nearby'

Cusà introduces a meta-discursive conditional, which expresses the condition to be fulfilled for the event encoded in the apodosis to acquire pragmatic relevance. Rather than being put against the content of the main clause, this condition is put against the performative act projected by the apodosis (Lombardi Vallauri 1999: 98). The relation is not on the propositional level: the computer shop exists regardless of whether the hearer needs to buy a cable. Nonetheless, the performance of the act loses pragmatic relevance if the hearer does not need to buy a cable. The profile of *cusà* as a connective can be described as *cusà* $P \rightarrow Q$, where P , rather than being a logical precondition that affects Q , is a set of assumptions whose possible existence makes explicit the circumstances that prompt the speaker to perform Q . In what follows, we present the occurrence of new functions in the more recent data.

3.2.3 Dubitative-corrective adverb

Cusà may behave as a dubitative-corrective adverb (cf. Italian *casomai* 'in case') referring to implicit content. In doing so, it (a) challenges the implicit and presupposed statement, depicting it as a hypothesis, and (b) presents the co-occurring clause as the correct consequence, in the case that the presupposition holds, as opposed to the preceding one (Mauri and Sansò 2014). The relation between the presupposed content and the expressed content may be summarized as follows: $A, cusà (P) \rightarrow Q$ (where P is contextually relevant and not overtly expressed). In this case, conditionality is still at work although it is given as presupposed.

- (8) *«Ma chi havi?» cci spija la vecchia. — «Vattinni, ca 'un l'hè diri a tia.» — «Ma vassía mi lu dici; cu' sa!»*
 (Pitrè 1985: II, 175)
 '“What's wrong with you?” the old woman said to him. — “Get out of here. I'm not going to tell you!”
 — “What might happen if your lordship talks to me!”' (lit. “But sir, just talk to me, **who knows!**”).

The earliest attestation of this use in our corpora is in Pitrè's work in the nineteenth century. In (8), the implicit level refers to the fact that if there is anyone to whom the speaker may want to say the fact under examination, it is properly the old woman. About Italian *casomai* (which is similar to *cusà*), Visconti (2000: 125) notes that in similar cases it expresses an alternative to what has been previously stated. Mauri and Sansò (2014: 110–111) note that the relation instantiated by *casomai* is between an explicit content and an implicit hypothesis.

3.2.4 Discourse marker

Finally, *cusà* occurs in isolation and activates some content on the implicit level:

- (9) A: *ci vai a aiutari o zio a sbarazzari u malaseno?*
 B: *no, un ci la fazzu*
 A: ***cusà*** ... (face-to-face conversation, Palermo, Sicily, 28 February 2019)
 A: ‘Would you please help our uncle to clean the garage up?’
 B: ‘No, I can’t do that’
 A: ‘**Who knows**’ [that is, ‘If you help him, it would hurt you!’]

This function is not attested in our diachronic data. In (9), *cusà* conveys an idiomatic meaning, which is difficult to capture lexically. To clarify it, we must consider the context of occurrence of the utterance. Speaker B refuses to perform A’s request to help their uncle. Speaker A reacts using *cusà* to allude to a conditional with an ironic meaning: ‘You won’t do it, *since if* you did it, it would hurt you.’ This is a rhetorical meaning of mock politeness (Fedriani and Molinelli 2019). As it remains implicit, such a meaning may be claimed to result from an insinuating function (Fiorentini and Sansò 2017: 65).⁵

Several clues lead to *cusà* being considered as a DM here. First, it is syntactically detachable and constitutes an intonation phrase. Nevertheless, deletion would affect the global interpretation, cancelling an important interactional component aimed at making the speaker’s intentions and her relationship with the interlocutor explicit. By virtue of its presupposition of a common ground, *cusà* may be considered as an intersubjective marker (Degand 2014), which performs interpersonal rather than epistemic functions. Consistent with such functional correlations, *cusà* displays content which is difficult to grasp lexically (Brown and Yule 1983: 106; Traugott 2020: 17). The conditional meaning is eclipsed in favour of the expression of irony and mock politeness on the implicit level (subjectification).

4 Grammaticalization of *cusà*: hypotheses

Looking at them retrospectively, the most ancient attestations of *cusà* in our corpus already show an advanced stage of grammaticalization.

While retaining the value of an opaque rhetorical question, *cusà* in Meli’s work is found to confer a dubitative/potential value to the clauses it introduced in examples such as (2). In this function in his work, *cusà* occurs both as two separate words (1a, b) and as a single word (2): in these examples, the original components may or may not merge at the formal level. The erosion of the boundary between two words is typically correlated with semantic weakening and an increase in generality (Brinton and Traugott 2005: 108). However, while the components may appear as separate units (most likely for stylistic reasons), it is impossible to insert any material between them (e.g., one cannot insert the clitic *lu* ‘it’ between *cu* and the short form *sa* to form **culusa* ‘who-it-knows’). In both the single-word and two-word forms, the *wh*-element (*cu*) loses its personal referentiality – that is, it no longer refers to an individual (whose identity is being sought in the question ‘who knows?’) – thus showing a process of “impersonalization”. The predicate *sa* loses relevance and semantic autonomy, and shifts into a generic sense of uncertainty or doubt about a certain proposition. The process of change results in a form displaying the speaker’s attitude towards what is being said (Traugott 1995: 32).

This shift may have been favoured by the use of the interrogative structure *cu sa* as a rhetorical impossible question (1a, b), as postulated by De Smet and Van de Velde (2013) for Dutch *wie weet* ‘who knows’ (see also Ramat and Ricca 1998: 193–194). As the description outlined in Section 3.1 shows, at the end of the process, *cusà* comes to express three different yet related functions by the eighteenth century:

⁵ We are quite aware of the fact that the meaning is idiomatic and difficult to grasp for a non-native speaker of Sicilian.

- (1) An opaque rhetorical question (Section 3.1.1) that precedes the *wh*- or *if*- element and modalizes the sentence with a dubitative nuance.
- (2) An adverbial (dubitative, Section 3.1.2) that occupies a medial position between two clauses and is used to strengthen the dubitative value of the *if*-clause in its scope and to provide a nuance of eventuality.
- (3) An adverbial with epistemic function (dubitative connective, 3.1.3), with scope on the entire sentence. At this stage, *cusà* has acquired syntactic mobility and has become an “extra-clausal constituent” (Dik 1997), although it continues to operate on the semantic level conveying the propositional attitude of the speaker.

Historical data reveal that *cusà*'s functional network is almost fully developed as early as the nineteenth century, as represented by Pitrè's collection (which is, in fact, generally regarded in literature as “contemporary Sicilian”). *Cusà* is involved in opaque rhetorical questions; it behaves as a near-connective/dubitative adverb and as an inter-clausal connective; it may be used as a complex dubitative conditional connective; and in addition, it functions as a dubitative-corrective adverb. The only function that cannot be observed in our nineteenth-century data is the DM use; hence we may provisionally assume that this is a function that develops later.

5 Concluding remarks

From a matrix clause heading *wh*- and *if*-clauses, *cusà* shifts towards connective, adverbial, and discursive functions. *Cusà* may play connective functions with non-predictive conditionals. In these contexts, it expresses eventuality. This meaning is mirrored in the modal adverbial functions.

In developing a dubitative function, *cusà* refers to content (*P*) depicting generic conditions of possibility/necessity affecting other content (*Q*), and expresses the speaker's epistemic stance (subjectification). The reference to conditionality may be used to convey discourse functions. The source notion of eventuality is thus exploited to convey attenuation in the context of a face-threatening speech act (widening the scope to a clausal level). Finally, the intersubjective potential of the marker is exploited in cases of insinuating functions. In such cases, the conditional in the scope of *cusà* is not verbalized, as the speaker's main aim is to presuppose the conditional meaning on the level of common ground.

The common denominator of *cusà*'s functions is the expression of epistemic commitment in terms of eventuality: the speaker suspends her epistemic positioning by virtue of some preconditions, which may be placed either on the proposition level or on the speech act level.

On the diachronic level, we can observe gaps. The first occurrences of *cusà* are only found in the eighteenth century, not the medieval texts. But it is only in the nineteenth century, represented by Pitrè's collection, that we find evidence for the more complex picture attested in present-day Sicilian, although still slightly less articulated: the data from Pitrè do not show any evidence of *cusà* as a DM, in particular as an expression of the *insinuating pragmatic function*. This latter can therefore be postulated as the most advanced stage in a hypothetical path of development:

opaque rhetorical question → dubitative adverb → conditional dubitative connective → dubitative-corrective adverb → discourse marker

However, while the current data suggest this reconstruction, they do not allow it to be confirmed with certainty. Only further research will be able to verify this, shedding light on the details of the different stages of diachronic development.

Corpora

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