

***-u** Runic:  Pronunciation: /u/

particle

Meanings

enclitic question particle marking a polar or alternative/binary question

Etymology

Probably from pre-Germanic **-u*, from Proto-Indo-European enclitic **h₂u*, a clitic variant of the additive/coordinating particle **h₂o/u/i*. Dunkel (2014: 334–345) compares Vedic Sanskrit उ (u) and Ancient Greek αὖ (aû), from an originally coordinative formation. The interrogative function is secondary: an additive or sentence-connecting enclitic ‘and, also, in addition’ was refunctionalized as a marker of an added, potentially alternative proposition, and then as a general polar-question marker. Dunkel explicitly compares Lühr’s (1995: 119–30) Lithuanian development, where inherited conjunctions meaning ‘or’ and ‘and’ were reanalyzed as question particles.

An alternative derivation from PIE **-we* remains semantically attractive, since Gothic -n (-u) occurs in binary questions, but it is formally and morphologically less economical. Dunkel (2014: 845–48) reconstructs **-we* as a separate enclitic disjunctive particle with reflexes such as Latin -ve, Vedic वा (vā), Gaulish -ue, and Ancient Greek ἢ (é), all meaning ‘or’, and Tocharian B wa; deriving Proto-Germanic **-u* from this particle would separate it from **-uh*, which Dunkel derives from **h₂u-k^we*, and would require an additional account of the loss or remodeling of **w-*.

Usage Note

This suffix was used in yes/no questions and to present a binary choice between two options. It was a clitic attached to the end of the first word in a clause, often a verb, but also between a preverb and a verb or between a preposition and a noun.

Descendants

-n (-u) (Gothic)

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