# AMBIGUITY IN ARABIC NEGATIVE POLAR QUESTIONS

## Prof. Reima Al-Jarf

King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Arabic is a diglossic language, i.e. it has two forms: A standard form called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is used in formal situations and in printed material and a non-standard colloquial form used in spoken language. Different spoken forms are used in Arabic depending on the country and there are even variations within each country or region. Thus we have Saudi Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, Moroccan Arabic and so on.

As for question formation, MSA and colloquial Arabic have two question types: Information questions and yes-no (polar) questions. *Information questions* are formed by simply inserting the question words *(what* ماذا – ما *– who* من *– which* أي *– why* لماذا *– where* أين *– when* متى*)* at the beginning of a sentence. No verb to do or subject-verb inversion is involved. *Yes-no questions* (polar) question are formed by inserting one of two particles *(*هل – الهمزة*)* at the beginning of the sentences whether it is verbal or nominal. In addition, Arabic uses intonation to ask yes-no questions without having to add any particles. Thus with a rising intonation, the sentence *"*أكلت التفاحة؟ *–* تعشيت؟*"* become yes-no questions, especially in colloquial spoken Arabic, such as Saudi Arabic. The only way to distinguish a yes–no question from a simple declarative statements is the rising question intonation used when saying the question.

In MSA, *negative forms* are formed by using four different particles *(* لم - لن - ما - لا*)* in verbal sentences (depending on the verb tense) and two particles *(*ليس – لا*)* in nominal sentences. Negative yes-no questions are formed by adding those four particles in verbal sentences (depending on the tense) and the two negative particles *(*لا - ليس*)* in nominal sentences. In colloquial Saudi Arabic, the negative particles *(*مو - ما*)* are used.

In addition*, negative yes-no* (polar) questions are also formed by intonation without adding Yes/No question formation particles, in which case, a statement acquires a polar question meaning when it is uttered with a rising intonation, whether this polar question is negative or not. This case is more common in colloquial spoken Arabic than written MSA. Sometimes, the same negative polar questions is uttered with different intonations, giving different meanings. For example, the negative polar question ألم تأكلي تفاحة أو برتقالة؟ *Didn't you eat an apple or orange",* formed by using a question formation particle (أ), is ambiguous in MSA. Uttering it with different rising intonations gives it several meanings as follows:

i.   It implies an alternative question (choice) about whether she has eaten an apple or an orange replying with the truth-value of the situation, or is replying to the polarity used in the question. The reply would not be "yes" or "no", but "an apple" or "an orange". It can also be an echo answer: *"I have eaten an Apple" or "I have eaten an orange" or " I have not eaten anything".*

ii.  It implies a general query about whether she has eaten anything. *"Apple"* and *"orange"* are mentioned as examples but the reference is not literal.

iii. It implies disapproval because she is asking for food. The speaker knows that she has eaten something but is not sure whether it was an apple or orange and does not want to give her more fruit or food.

iv.  It can be an exclamation as she is probably saying that she is hungry, but the speaker is surprised because he/she knows that she has eaten something but not sure what it is.

In colloquial Arabic*, "Didn't you buy a dress last week?"* ما اشتريت فستان الأسبوع الماضي؟", which is a negative polar question formed without a question formation particle, is also ambiguous and may render the following meanings:

i. It implies a neutral question about whether she bought the dress or not, replying with the truth-value of the situation, or is replying to the polarity used in the question. The answer would be either *"Yes"* or *"no",* or an echo answer: *"Yes I bought it"* or *"No I didn't buy it".*
ii. It implies a confirmation question to which the reply is "yes" only.
iii. It implies a confirmation question to which the reply is "no" only.
iv. It implies disapproval: *"Didn't you buy a dress last week? Why do you want to by another dress?*
v. It implies an exclamation: *Wow! You have you bought a new dress, although you bought one last week! What a surprise!*
vi. It implies a rebuke: *Why do you want waste money on another dress? Didn't you by a dress last week?*

The context makes it clear which meaning each form implies.

The presentation investigates the multiple meanings of negative polar questions in spoken colloquial Arabic as well as MSA, how negative polar questions are posed, the kinds of ambiguities resulting from using different rising intonations in the case of negative polar questions formed with and without question particles, and how negative polar questions are answered. A sample of negative polar questions in MSA as well as colloquial Saudi Arabic will be collected. Each will be uttered with different rising intonations and recordings of those will be made.

To validate the intonations of the affirmative and negative polar questions and types of meanings conveyed with each, a sample of informants who are native speakers of Arabic listened to recordings of each utterance, uttered each affirmative and negative polar question with a variety of intonations and gave their own interpretation of the meaning conveyed.

**References**
A contrastive study of English and Arabic. Defense Language Institute.
https://www.livelingua.com/dli/Arabic/intermediate-arabic/A%20Contrastive%20Study%20of%20English%20and%20Arabic.pdf

Al-Momani, Islam M. (2011).The Syntax of Sentential Negation in Jordanian Arabic. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 1(5), 482-496. Alsharif, Ahmad and Sadler,

Bahloul, Maher. 1994. Extending the NegP Hypothesis: Evidence from Standard Arabic. In M. Eid, ed., Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics: Papers from the annual symposium on Arabic Linguistics, vol. VIII, pages 31–47. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Louisa (2009). Negation In Modern Standard Arabic: AN LFG Approach. In Miriam Butt and Tracy Holloway King (Eds). Proceedings of the LFG09 Conference. University of Essex University of Essex.

Ouhalla, Jamal. (2002). Negative sentences. In J. Ouhalla and U. Shlonsky (eds.), Themes in Arabic and Hebrew Syntax, Dordrecht, Holland: Kluwer. Pp. 299–320.