

Responses to negative questions: question bias and the meaning of 'yes' and 'no'

Sophie Repp, University of Cologne

When we talk to one another, one of the objectives is to find out what we agree on and what we do not agree on. This objective can be surprisingly difficult to reach when we use a negation in the sentences we say. Using the word *yes* as a response to a statement like *Pete hasn't watched the new series yet* will mean for most speakers of English that Pete has watched the new series. In the German translation of this exchange, a substantial minority of German speakers would consider *yes* a non-grammatical answer, whereas the majority of speakers would assume that Pete has not watched the new series. When it comes to negative questions like *Hasn't Peter watched the new series yet?* or *Has Peter not watched the new series yet?* sorting out what a response particle means seems to be even more complicated.

The cross-linguistic and inter-individual variation surrounding response particles has received increased interest in recent years, and experimental investigations have sharpened our understanding of the meaning and use of these particles including their variation in a number of languages. However, with respect to negative questions serving as antecedents for response particles, there have been few systematic investigations that pay attention to the various *biases* these questions come with. Biases are requirements on the context in which the question can be used felicitously. There are different types of biases. For instance, negative questions may express that the speaker had a particular assumption about the truth of the proposition whose polarity is at issue, which is the so-called *epistemic bias*. Negative questions may also express that there is evidence in the context for or against the truth of that proposition, which is the so-called *evidential bias*. There are more, and subtler meaning aspects that questions may express – concerning speaker expectations and wishes, or the strength of the contextual evidence etc. Biases are quite important for theories of response particles because response particles are generally considered to be anaphoric devices that rely on antecedent propositions (or even on entire syntactic structures) in the discourse context. Biases essentially introduce propositions into the discourse context. Thus they influence what antecedents will be available for a response particle.

This talk investigates for German how biases in negative polar questions influence the choice of response particle to express that a certain proposition is true or not. It presents experimental results from an acceptability study testing three types of negative polar questions. It does this in an experimental setup that is based on an earlier study on polar responses to negative assertions in German (Claus, Meijer, Repp & Krifka, 2017). Hence the results for questions vs. assertions on antecedents can be directly compared. This kind of comparison is important because it has been argued that there are differences between different types of speech acts as antecedents to response particles (e.g. Holmberg 2016). The study shows that the acceptability of responses to negative questions indeed displays a different distribution than the acceptability of responses to assertions. Furthermore, there are substantial differences between different types of negative questions. The results will be in a semantic-pragmatic framework, where response particles may on the one hand signal the polarity of the answer they express, and on the other hand, are illocutionary operators that reject, or agree with a previous utterance. The proposal differs from earlier proposals where response particles are either treated as anaphors that are anaphoric only to propositions in the discourse context, or as heads of an ellipsis clause.