

SOME PROBLEMS OF YES — NO ANSWERS

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The literature on Yes-No questions is quite abundant. Yes-No answers and the problems connected with them have not been discussed very often. The present paper offers some observations on the responses the addressee may utter and their relevance in discourse analysis.

From the point of view of the addressee and the responses he can provide, Yes-No questions and statements seem to bring about similar answers. In Yes-No questions the speaker asks whether what he is saying is acceptable to the addressee as true; in statements he proposes the addressee to believe that what he is saying is true. In both cases the addressee may agree or disagree with what the speaker suggests to accept as true, and syntactically he can do it by uttering positive or negative sentences,¹ as illustrated by the following examples:

- (1) Has he written a book?
 - (2a) Yes, he has.
 - (2b) No, he hasn't.
- (3) He has written a book.
 - (4a) Yes, he has.
 - (4b) No, he hasn't.

Similarly in Polish:

- (5) Czy on napisał książkę?
 - (6a) Tak, napisał.²
 - (6b) Nie, nie napisał.

¹ See E. Pope (1972) for more details on question-answer system along somewhat different lines.

² Polish does not use auxiliaries and *do*, so the lexical verb has to be repeated or left out. It seems that sometimes the answer is correct or sounds better with the verb repeated and sometimes without it. I have not investigated the reasons of this phenome-

(7) On napisał książkę.

(8a) Tak, napisał.

(8b) Nie, nie napisał.

However, the same system does not work with negative questions and statements, as illustrated by the examples below:

(9) Hasn't he written a book?

(10a) Yes, he has.

(10b) No, he hasn't.

but (11) He hasn't written a book.

(12a) Yes, he has.

(12b) No, he hasn't.

(12c) Yes, he hasn't.

(12d) No, he has.

And similarly in Polish:

(13) Czy on nie napisał książki?

(14a) Tak, napisał.

(14b) Nie, nie napisał.

(15) On nie napisał książki.

(16a) Tak, napisał.

(16b) Nie, nie napisał.

(16c) Tak, nie napisał.

(16d) Nie, napisał.

Let us first examine the statement-response situation. It is necessary to keep in mind here that (11) may have a number of interpretations depending on the place of the sentence stress. I will not go into details here, as the phenomenon of negation association with focus has been discussed among others by Jackendoff (1972) and Szwedek (1976). It appears that the texts under analysis can be grouped in two ways:

(17) a. the traditional, question vs answer distinction,

b. two answers vs four answers distinction, i.e., on the stimulus side:

positive questions

negative questions vs negative statements.

positive statements

The structure of the responses, particularly to negative statements, indicates that the addressee feels there are two components he can agree or disagree with, i.e.,

(18) a. Speaker's claim about a proposition X,

b. Proposition X itself.

non and am not aware of any study of this problem. Intonation, particularly sentence stress marking focus, is not considered in this paper, though I realize that it may be crucial (see final paragraph of the paper).

In some cases this double structure is signalled by a pause between, for example, *No* and *he has* in (12d), which shows that *No* and *he has* refer to two different elements. As indicated above, with such a complex structure the addressee has a choice of negating or confirming two elements as specified in (18). If we use T (truth, the attitude of the speaker to his proposition)³ for (18a) and S (sentence) for (18b), we may show the interaction between the speaker and the addressee in the following diagrammatic way:

(19) Agreement:

a. Positive:

Speaker	Addressee
T	T ⁴
↓	↓
S ₁	S ₂

Explanation:

Speaker utters S₁ as true.

Addressee shares T with the speaker, so he utters S₂.

Examples (3)–(4a)

b. Negative:

Speaker	Addressee
T	T
↓	↓
Neg S ₁	Neg S ₂

Explanation:

Speaker utters Neg S₁ as true. Addressee agrees, so he utters Neg S₂.

According to this formula the response should be (12c), where *Yes* would refer to Addressee's T (addressee agrees)⁵, and *he hasn't* to the proposition S₁. And that indeed is one of the possibilities. The other possible response (12b) is most probably a simple extension of Neg from S₂ to the left.⁶

(20) Disagreement:

a. Positive-negative:

Speaker	Addressee
T	Neg T
↓	↓
S ₁	Neg S ₂

³ This is in agreement with sincerity condition.

⁴ We will assume throughout the paper that S₁ and S₂ refer to the same proposition.

⁵ Cf. perhaps better: *Right, he hasn't* or *So he hasn't*.

⁶ This is by no means exceptional or unique; cf. *I think he is not coming* vs *I don't think he is coming*.

Explanation:

Speaker utters S_1 as true. Addressee disagrees that S_1 is true, and he utters Neg S_2 .

Example (3)—(4b)

b. Negative-positive:

Speaker	Addressee
T	Neg T
↓	↓
Neg S_1	S_2

Explanation:

Speaker utters Neg S_1 as true. Addressee disagrees that Neg S_1 is true, so he utters S_2 .

Again according to this formula the response should be (12d), where *No* would refer to T (Addressee disagrees) and *he has* to S_1 . The other possibility, (12a), is again most probably an extension of the positive proposition *he has*.

At this point it is probably in order to mention that any situation of the type

(21) Speaker
Neg T
↓
S

is, of course, impossible from the point of view of the addressee. That means that even if the speaker knows that what he is saying is not true, what he is in fact communicating is 'I want you—the addressee to believe that what I am saying is true'.

Concerning the four situations described above as (19) and (20), the two that have a possibility of two answers ((19b) and (20b)) are naturally those in which the addressee has a four way choice:

Speaker	Addressee
T	T
	Neg T
Neg S	S
	Neg S

i.e., the addressee may choose to utter one of the following combinations:

T S	Yes, he has.
(Neg T) S	No, he has.

T (Neg S)	Yes, he hasn't.
(Neg T) (Neg S)	No, he hasn't.

Such a choice is not available for positive statements, as it is not possible for the addressee to agree with the speaker and deny the truth of his statement, or disagree with him and confirm the truth of his statement at the same time, i.e., the following situations are impossible:

(22) Speaker	Addressee
a. T	T
↓	↓
S_1	Neg S_2
b. T	Neg T
↓	↓
S_1	S_2
c. T	T
↓	↓
Neg S_1	S_2
d. T	Neg T
↓	↓
Neg S_1	Neg S_2

If we assumed that the four-answer effect is due to negation, we would expect negative questions to be followed by four answers as well. However, as (9)—(10) above show, only two answers are permitted. Answers like (12c) and (12d) are clearly incorrect.

It has been suggested (Quirk et al. 1972; Bhatia 1974) that negative questions like (9) have positive presuppositions. Thus (23) and (24)

(23) Weren't you going to India?'

(24) Czy ty nie miałeś jechać do Indii?

mean that "the speaker presupposes that "X was going to India". And at the time of the speech act he expected X to have left for India. Contrary to the speaker's expectation the listener has not left for India (Quirk et al. (1972:54—55)). Also (9)

(9) Hasn't John written a book?

presupposes that John was expected to write a book. Thus for the speaker it was true that John had written a book until he had grounds to think otherwise. This positive aspect seems to be dominating in bringing out the addressee's

⁷ Bhatia (1974:54).

answers.⁸ What exactly the underlying structure of negative questions like (23) is, is still a matter of dispute.⁹

In the light of the positive meaning of negative questions it seems that different deep structures have to be postulated for negative questions and negative portion of Yes—No questions (if we accept the view that Yes—No questions are of alternative nature).

The interaction between the speaker and the addressee (or some third party) is also reflected in certain phenomena in embedded structures like (25) and (26):

(25) I know whether Peter will come.

(26) Wiem czy Piotr przyjdzie.

Since part of the meaning of a question is "the speaker doesn't know", (25) and (26) cannot be interpreted as directly embedded questions like (27) and (28):

(27) I asked whether Peter would come?

(28) Zapytałem czy Piotr przyjdzie?

because that would mean that the speaker of (25) and (26) says at the same time *I know x* and *I don't know x*. However, (25) and (26) are acceptable under the interpretation (29) (Polish (30)):

(29) I know the answer to the question whether Peter will come.

(30) Znam odpowiedź na pytanie czy Piotr przyjdzie.

where *question (pytanie)* is to be derived from *X asks a question*, where $X \neq I$. The same relations would hold for sentences like (31), (32) and (33), (34).

(31) *I am angry that the mail isn't sorted yet but I don't know that Futzie sorted it.

(32) *Jestem zły, że korespondencja nie jest jeszcze posortowana, ale nie wiem, że Futzie ją posortował.

⁸ There seems to be a positive parallel to the structure like (9), for example *Was I surprised?* except that the intonation is quite different and the interpretation is slightly different too. What the two structures have in common is the presence of an element of a positive statement.

⁹ For example, Stockwell et al. (1973) write that such questions resemble more statements with negative tags. On the other hand, Pope (1972) argues that they cannot be derived from tagged statements. It is worth mentioning here that sentences of the type illustrated by (33) are correct not only when different persons are involved, but also with one person, provided the times of 'knowing that x' and 'knowing that not-x' are different, as in:

I was angry that the mail wasn't sorted but I didn't know that Futzie had sorted it.

which means that at time t_x the speaker didn't know that the mail was sorted, but he knows it now.

where the speaker claims at the same time it is true that the mail is not sorted yet and it is true that Futzie sorted it, thus the same person is involved in claiming that two opposite facts are true at the same time (I do not here consider the interpretation under which Futzie is known to be sorting things and yet not to have sorted). However, similar sentences (33) and (34) are correct:

(33) John is angry that the mail isn't sorted yet, but he doesn't know that Futzie sorted it.

(34) Janek jest zły, że korespondencja nie jest jeszcze posortowana, ale nie wie, że Futzie już ją posortował.

Here the speaker says that John thinks (assumes as true) that the mail isn't sorted yet, but he (the speaker) knows that Futzie did sort it. Thus two different persons are involved in knowing two opposite facts as true.

The above discussion shows that there is no parallel between positive or negative statements and positive or negative questions. In fact, the data described above seem to indicate that there is nothing like negative questions comparable to what we called positive questions. The positive meaning of the negative questions may be a result of interaction between focus, negation and question (see Jackendoff 1972 and Szwedek 1976 for negation and question association with focus). This, however, is a problem for further research.

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