

Fifty shades of 'no'

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Polar questions are defined by their ability to be answered positively or negatively. Typologically, the most common means for that are short words like YES and NO (Enfield et al. 2018). This set of default particles can be non-binary: e.g., German and French have a third marker of confirmation for negative contexts (Pope 1976), and Finnish has two YES-particles, *niin* and *yoo*, opposed pragmatically (Sorjonen 2001). In this paper, we show that negative answers also exhibit great variability, although, usually, outside of the default set.

Besides the closed set of default particles, a language can have a whole range of secondary means of saying 'yes' and 'no' (cf. English *Exactly! OK! Nope!*). They form an open class, with great variability both in terms of function and surface structure. Notably, they are quite often formulaic, cf. English *You bet! No way!*

We collected a database of formulaic negative answers in Czech, English, French, German, Italian, Korean, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Slovenian, and Turkish. All these languages have dozens of secondary NOes besides the default negation particle. In the database, they are manually annotated by multiple parameters (see Buzanov et al. 2022).

From this sample, we draw two major conclusions. First, the choice of the units strongly depends on the illocutionary type of the utterance to which it replies (the stimulus). Many expressions distinguish between stimuli like requests or suggestions, and stimuli like polar questions and declaratives (cf. 1a-b). It allows categorizing them, accordingly, into classes of refusal, and (factual) negation. These classes further split into subclasses based on additional semantic components (like assessment or intensity, cf. 2a-b).

Secondly, the surface structure of these units allows for reconstruction of their original semantics. Some structural models proved to be consistently productive across the language sample. E.g., negation intensifiers often detach from the sentence and start functioning as an independent negative answer (cf. the equivalents of *By no means!* in 3a-d), sometimes even without overt negative markers (3c-d).

The investigation of the secondary negation and confirmation units can be a first step towards the typology of pragmaticalization, i.e., the combination of formal and semantic change that leads to the emergence of new pragmatic markers. The default particles YES and NO can be regarded as an ultimate result of that process; there is etymological evidence that at least some of them go back to formulaic units (cf. Russian *net* 'no', from 'NEG be.PRS.3SG here'). The default YES-NO systems can remain stable for many centuries; consequently, there is often lack of data to establish the etymological source of the particles, let alone trace the conditions that provoked their pragmaticalization (cf. the debate on the origins of *yes* in Wallace & van der Wurff 2013). The data on the secondary means of confirmation and negation gives us a valuable opportunity of a usage-based examination of their movement towards the functions of YES and NO.

References

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Examples

(1) French

(a) refusal

– *Donne-le-moi.* – **Pas question. I ?? Tu parles.**

‘– Give it to me. – **No way!**’ [InterCorp15]

(b) negation

– *Je te bats!* – **Tu parles. I ?? Pas question!**

– I’m beating you . – Yeah, right (= Not at all).’ [InterCorp15]

(2) Serbian

(a) moderate negation

– *Volite ragbi?* – **Baš i ne.**

‘– Do you like football? – Not really’. [InterCorp15]

(b) intensive negation

– *Stani. Ne kriviš valjda mene zbog onog malopre?* – **Taman posla. Ko može tebe da krivi?**

‘– Wait. You ain’t blaming that back there on me? – **No.** Who could blame you?’ [InterCorp15]

(3) Negation intensifiers as negative answers

(a) Slovenian: *niti slučajno* ‘neither accidentally’

<intensifier>

*To me **niti slučajno** ne zanima.*

‘I do not care about it **at all!**’. [InterCorp15]

<negative answer>

– *Dam ti denar, če mi ti daš avto.* – **Niti slučajno.**

‘– I’ll give you the money if you give me the car. – **No way!**’ [InterCorp15]

(b) German: *auf keinen Fall* ‘on none-ACC.M.SG case-ACC.SG’

<intensifier>

*Schäden dürfen **auf keinen Fall** selbst repariert werden.*

‘Damaged items may **by no means** be repaired by yourself.’ [InterCorp15]

<negative answer>

– *Kann ich eine Freundin mitbringen?* – **Auf keinen Fall.**

‘– Can I bring a friend? – **Absolutely not.**’ [InterCorp15]

(c) Turkish: *hiç de bile* ‘ever also even’

<intensifier>

***Hiç de bile** endişelenmiyorum.*

‘I’m not worried **at all!**’ [InterCorp15]

<negative answer>

– *Jennifer ne dese onu yapıyorsun.* – **Hiç de bile.**

‘– You always do what Jennifer tells you to do. – **No, I don’t.**’ [InterCorp15]

(d) Polish: *za skarby* ‘for treasure-ACC.PL’

<intensifier>

***Za skarby** nie pójdą do lekarza*

‘They will **never** go to the doctor.’ [InterCorp15]

<negative answer>

*Ale siąść do kolacji z taką śmierdzącą chujowizną jak ty? **Za skarby.***

‘But to sit and dine with a piece of shit like you? **Never!**’. [InterCorp15]