



## Yes or No, or how to answer a negative question

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### ► To cite this version:

Hana Gruet-Skrabalova. Yes or No, or how to answer a negative question. *Linguistica*, 2016, Current Trends in Generative Linguistics, 56, pp.127-142. 10.4312/linguistica.56.1.127-142 . hal-01679867

**HAL Id: hal-01679867**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01679867>**

Submitted on 10 Jan 2018

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## YES OR NO, OR HOW TO ANSWER A NEGATIVE QUESTION

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to investigate the status of particles in answers to negative questions. A *yes-no question* is a question that asks to identify whether P or not P is true (Hamblin 1973), and is minimally answered by an answering particle. Answers to yes-no questions have given rise to a large amount of literature since Pope (1972), who gives a detailed description of the types of answers across languages. She distinguishes two major systems: truth-based systems, in which the particles confirm or disconfirm the true value presupposed by the question, like in Japanese in (1), and polarity-based systems, in which particles express positive or negative polarity, like in Spanish in (2).

- (1) a. *Kimi tsukareteiru?*      *Hai. // Iie.*      (Jap)<sup>1</sup>  
      you    tired                yes    no  
      ‘Are you tired.’        ‘Yes (I am).’ // ‘No (I am not).’  
b. *Kimi tsukareteinai?*      *Hai (tsukareteinai). // Iie (tsukareteiru desu).*  
      you    tired-neg            yes (tired-neg)      no (tired be)  
      ‘Aren’t you tired?’      ‘I am not’. // ‘I am.’
- (2) a. *¿Enviaste una carta a Paul?*      *Sì. // No.*      (Sp)  
      ‘Did you send a letter to Paul?’    ‘Yes.’ // ‘No.’  
b. *¿No enviaste una carta a Paul?*      *No. // Sì.*  
      ‘Didn’t you send a letter to Paul?’ ‘No.’ // ‘Yes, I did.’

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<sup>1</sup> This example is from my Japanese informant.

The same particles are used to answer both positive and negative questions, although some languages “reinforce” the positive particle to negative questions, e.g. the conjunction *but* before *yes* in Czech, see (3), and some languages use a specific particle for positive answers to negative questions, e.g. *si* instead of *oui* in French, see (4).

- (3) a. *Poslal jsi Pavlovi dopis?*                      *Ano. // Ne.*                      (= 2a) (Cz)  
       b. *Neposlal jsi Pavlovi dopis?*                      *Ne. // Ale ano.*                      (= 2b) (Cz)
- (4) a. *Est-il venu?*                                      *Oui. // Non.* (Fr)  
       is he come                                      yes      no  
       ‘Has he come?’
- b. *N’est-il pas venu?*                                      *Non. // \*Oui. / Si.*  
       did he not come                                      no      yes      yes  
       ‘Hasn’t he come?’

Although the behaviour of particles has been described for many languages (see Laka 1990; Martins 1994; Holmberg 2001; Holmberg 2012; Farkas 2010; Krifka 2012 a.o.), it has been hardly observed that particles could be used in both ways within a same language. So, Holmberg (2001; 2013) notes that negative questions with *not* in English can be confirmed by both *yes* and *no*, see (5), because *not* is ambiguous between sentential and VP-negation. In other words, he argues that *yes* only confirms negative questions when *not* is interpreted as VP-negation, thus when the question is rather affirmative that truly negative.

- (5) a. *Is John not coming? No, he is not.* (sentential Neg) / *Yes, he is not.* (VP-Neg)  
       b. *Isn’t John coming? No, he isn’t.* (sentential Neg) / *\*Yes, he isn’t.* (\*VP-Neg)

This paper shows that negative questions in Czech can be both confirmed and disconfirmed by *yes* or *no*, see (6), which makes the particles potentially ambiguous. The negation is expressed by the negative prefix on the finite verb, cf. (3) above.

- (6) *Rodiče nejsou doma?*      *Ne. / Ano.*      // *Ne. / Ale ano.*  
 parents neg-are home      no    yes      no    but yes  
 ‘Aren’t the parents at home?’ ‘They are not.’ // ‘They are.’

The use of the particles is however not free. It is argued that it depends on the interpretation of the sentential negation in the question, which can be either true or expletive (cf. Brown and Franks 1995 for Russian negative questions). This semantic distinction is furthermore tightly linked to the syntactic position of the negation, according to which we can distinguish between negative interrogative clauses and negative declarative clauses used as questions (cf. Gunlogson 2001). An analysis in terms of absolute and relative polarity (Farkas 2010) is then proposed to account for the mixed behaviour of answering particles: particles express absolute polarity in answers to interrogative questions, whose polarity is open (Holmberg 2001), and relative polarity in answers to declarative questions, whose polarity has been already specified.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes two types of answers to negative questions in Czech, showing a mixed behaviour of answering particles. Section 3 deals with negative questions; several pieces of evidence are discussed in order to show that we have to distinguish between questions with expletive negation and questions with true negation and that this distinction accounts for the distribution of answering particles. Section 4 focuses on expression of the polarity in the answers; it is proposed that particles express absolute or relative polarity depending on the polarity of the question. Section 5 sums up the paper.

## **2. TWO TYPES OF ANSWERS TO NEGATIVE QUESTIONS**

To show that both answering particles in Czech can confirm and disconfirm a negative question, we need to specify that Czech (like many other languages, e.g. Basque, Finish,

Portuguese, Irish) can reply a question by using use the finite verb of the question, either alone or in combination with a particle, see (7). The positive verb always indicates a positive answer and the negative verb a negative answer. Verbal answers will therefore be used throughout the paper to clearly state the polarity of the answer.

- (7) a. *Poslal jsi Pavlovi dopis?* (Ano) poslal. // (Ne) neposal.  
 sent be.2sg to-Paul letter yes sent // no neg.sent  
 ‘Did you send Paul a letter?’  
 b. *Neposal jsi Pavlovi dopis?* (Ne) neposal. // (Ale ano) poslal.  
 neg-sent be.2sg to-Paul letter no neg.sent // but yes sent  
 ‘Didn’t you send Paul a letter?’

Let us look again at the negative question in (6), repeated in (8) and completed by verbal answers (in brackets) that can accompany the particles:

- (8) *Rodiče nejsou doma?* A: *Ne (nejsou).* // *Ale ano (jsou).*  
 parents neg-are home no neg-are but yes are  
 B: *Ano (nejsou).* // *Ne (jsou)*  
 yes neg-are no are  
 ‘Aren’t the parents at home?’ ‘They are not.’ // ‘They are.’

The puzzle we are dealing here is that the question ‘*Aren’t the parents at home?*’ can be answered in two ways, which I call type A and type B answers and which are summarized in table 1 below. In type A answers, *ne* means ‘they are not’, while *ano* means ‘they are’. In contrast, in type B answers, *ne* means ‘they are’, while *ano* means ‘they are not’. The particles appear, thus, to be ambiguous; they may also combine with both negative and positive verb. The interpretation of each answer is however clearly given by the verb, meaning that the combination of the particle and the verb cannot be considered as redundant.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Speakers actually often prefer verbal answers to answering particles alone.

	Negative answers	Positive answers
Type A answers	<b>ne + neg-V</b>	<b>(ale) ano + verb</b>
Type B answers	<b>ano + neg-V</b>	<b>ne + V</b>

Table 1 : Two types of answers to negative questions

Example (8) seems to indicate that A and B answers are always equally available, but this is not true. First, in oral production, the particles in B answers are better emphasized and separated from the verb, which confirms that they bear another information than the verb (i.e. they do not indicate the absolute polarity of the answer, see section 4):

- (9) *Jan nemluví francouzsky?*    <sup>?</sup>*Ne, mluví.*    / *NE – mluví.*  
 John neg.speaks French    no (he) speaks / NO (he) speaks  
 ‘John doesn’t speak French?’

Furthermore, B answers are generally judged unacceptable as replies to questions containing an initial verb, meaning that the question’s form matters for the choice of the answer (see section 3 for more details):

- (10) *Neposlal jsi mu ten dopis?*    *\*Ano (neposlal).* / *Neposlal.* // *\*Ne (poslal).* / *Poslal.*  
 neg-sent be.2sg to-him the letter    yes (neg-sent)    neg-sent    no (sent)    sent  
 ‘Didn’t you send him the letter?’

Importantly, however, B answers can be used as replies to negative questions with negative polarity items like *ani* (not-one/not-any), see (11). Since *any* must be licensed by sentential negation (see section 3.3 for more on NPIs), negative questions confirmed by B answers must contain sentential negation. They therefore differ from negative questions with *not* in English that allow confirmation by *yes* only with VP-negation reading, see (5) above.

- (11) *Jan \*(ne)pozvalani jedného spolužáka?* *Ano (ani jedného).* // *Ne (nějakého pozval).*  
 John (neg-)invited not-one schoolmate    yes    not-one // no (he) some invited  
 ‘Didn’t John invite any of his schoolmates?’

The difference between A and B answers cannot thus be due to the contrast between sentential and VP-negation, but it must nevertheless be linked to the negation. The hypothesis I explore in the following section is that in some negative questions, negation loses its negative force and behaves like expletive negation. Negative questions with expletive negation behave like positive questions, whose polarity I assume to be open (following Holmberg 2001). Thus, they are answered by type A answers, in which particles indicate absolute (positive or negative) polarity. In contrast, negative questions with true negation behave like negative assertions, whose polarity is fixed. Thus, they are answered by type B answers, in which particles indicate relative polarity, i.e. (dis)agreement with the polarity of the question.

### 3. NEGATIVE QUESTIONS

The main claim of this section is that in some questions, negation is not true (from the truth conditional point of view), but expletive. The term ‘expletive’ (or ‘pleonastic’) negation usually refers to a phonologically overt negative morpheme that lacks negative semantic content (see Espinal 1992 for Romance; Brown & Franks 1995 for Slavic). It typically appears after lexical items like *before* or *until*, and in constructions with verbs like *to fear* or *to doubt*, see (12). Contrary to true negation, expletive negation cannot license NIPhrases in Slavic, compare (13a) and (13b).<sup>3</sup> For Brown & Franks (1995: 262), “canonical pleonastic negation (in Slavic) consists of a NegP with either an empty or vacuous specifier position. The head position is filled with *ne* [...], but there is no Negation Operator, the bearer of the semantics, to give the sentence negative force.”

- 12) a. *Il n'est pas arrivé.* (ne....pas: true Neg)<sup>4</sup> (Fr)  
           he neg-is not arrived  
           ‘He hasn’t arrived.’

<sup>3</sup> See section 3.4 for licensing of NPIs in Czech.

<sup>4</sup> In (12a) and (12c), *ne* can be omitted.

- b. *Il faut finir avant qu'il n'arrive.* (ne: expletive Neg)  
 it must finish before that-he neg-arrives  
 'We have to finish before he arrives.'
- c. *Je suis sûr que nous ne sommes pas en retard.* (ne: true Neg)  
 I am sure that we neg are not late  
 'I am sure that we are not late.'
- d. *Je crains que nous ne soyons en retard.* (ne: expletive Neg)  
 I fear that we are late
- (13) a. *Nikdo nepřišel.* (ne-: true Neg) (Cz)  
 nobody neg-come  
 'Nobody came.'
- b. *Bojím se, aby někdo / \*nikdo nepřišel pozdě.* (ne-: expletive Neg)  
 I-fear refl. that somebody / nobody neg-come late  
 'I am afraid that somebody might come late.'

More interestingly, Brown & Franks (1995) and Abels (2002) observe that negative questions with the interrogative particle *li* in Russian do not license NI-phrases, which would suggest that they also contain expletive negation. However, the same questions license Genitive of Negation. Moreover, questions without particle *li* license both NI-phrases and Genitive of Negation. To account for this asymmetry, Brown & Franks (1995:266) claim that "certain independently motivated grammatical principles, such as Rizzi's (1990) Relativized Minimality, conspire to prevent negation from having negative force [...] in Russian Yes/No questions". In their analysis, negation in *li*-questions is forced to be pleonastic, because a Yes/No operator in Spec-CP prevents *ne* to be licensed by the Negation Operator (adjoined to CP) when *ne* (cliticized on V) moves to C. I pursue here the view that negation can be rendered expletive by the interrogation. In other words, the interrogative operator blocks the negative operator to bind *ne* when Verb(Neg)-moves to C, so that *ne* cannot retain its negative force. I will show that despite the absence of Genitive of Negation in Czech, the phenomenon of expletive negation is relevant and allows to account for the distribution of A and B answers to negative questions.



### 3.1 Word order

Main questions in Czech do not contain an overt interrogative C. Still, assuming that syntactic clause-type (declarative, interrogative, exclamative) and illocutionary act (assertion, questioning, exclamation) can be dissociated (Beyssade & Marandin 2006), we can distinguish two types of questions. Czech is a SVO language in which interrogative clauses, are formed by V-fronting (and *wh*-fronting in case of *wh*-questions), see (14). Interrogative clauses are typically used as questions. But declarative clauses with (not only) SVO order can also be used to express questioning. In the following discussion, I will show that negative interrogatives and negative declarative clauses used as questions differ with respect to negative presupposition, combinability with evidential and modal adverbials, licensing of NPIs, and also the answers they receive.

- (14) a. *Marie dala dětem koláčky.* / \**Dala Marie dětem koláčky.* (declarative)  
Mary<sub>nom</sub> given children<sub>dat</sub> cakes<sub>acc</sub> given Mary<sub>nom</sub> children<sub>dat</sub> cakes<sub>acc</sub>  
‘Mary gave children some cakes.’  
b. *Dala Marie dětem koláčky?* / *Komu dala Marie koláčky?* (interrogative)  
given Mary<sub>nom</sub> children<sub>dat</sub> cakes<sub>acc</sub> who<sub>dat</sub> given Mary<sub>nom</sub> cakes<sub>acc</sub>  
‘Did Mary give children some cakes?’ / ‘To whom did Mary give some cakes?’

### 3.2 Negative presupposition

Negative interrogatives (with non-focal intonation<sup>5</sup>) are used to elicit information, to solicit an opinion, or to make a polite request for action (see Gunlogson 2001 for detailed distribution). They do not convey any presupposition. Questions in (15) are understood as open questions that the speaker uses to find out whether the doctor is or is not in his office, and whether the addressee did or did not take a wrong road. They can only be answered by type A answers.

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<sup>5</sup> See ex. (21) for focal intonation.

- (15)    a. *Není doktor v ordinaci?*  
             isn't the doctor in his office  
             b. *Kam jdete? Nespletli jste si náhodou cestu?*  
                where are you going? didn't you accidentally take a wrong road?  
*Ne, není.* / \**Ano, není.* (he is not)  
*Ano, je.* / \**Ne, je.* (he is).  
*Ne, nespletli.* / \**Ano, nespletli.* (we didn't)  
*Ano, spletli.* / \**Ne, spletli.* (we did)

On the contrary, negative declarative questions are typically used when the speaker expects a negative answer or when (s)he wishes to express an emotional response (surprise, disagreement, etc.). They convey a negative presupposition like negative declarative clauses. Questions in (16) are typically used when the speakers expects the doctor not to be in his office or if he is surprised that the addressee did not find the right way. Type B answers are then used to confirm or disconfirm this negative bias.

- (16) a. *Doktor není v ordinaci?* *Ano, není.* (he is not) // *Ne, je.* (he is)  
the doctor isn't in his office  
b. *Jak je to možné? Vy jste nenašli správnou cestu?* *Ano, nenašli.* (we did not)  
how is it possible? you didn't find the right way *Ne, našli.* (we did)

However, the biased interpretation in (16) is not obligatory, which explains that these questions can be also answered by type A answers, as shown in (16') (see section 3.4, ex. (24) for analysis). The ambiguity of declarative questions can be avoided by using final rising intonation for neutral interpretation (like in interrogative clauses) and rising intonation followed by final fall for biased interpretation.

- (16') a. *Doktor není v ordinaci?*      *Ne, není.* (he is not) // *Ale ano, je.* (he is)  
the doctor isn't in his office

### 3.3 Evidential and modal adverbs

The fact that only negative declarative questions can express a negative bias is confirmed by their compatibility with adverbs expressing modality or evidentiality, like *určitě* ('of course'), *zřejmě* ('apparently'), *jistě* ('surely'), see (17). These adverbs are considered as

bias markers’ and cannot appear in interrogative clauses in English neither, see (18) (cf. Huddleston 1994).

- (17) a. *Pavel s tím určitě **nesouhlasil**?* / *#**Nesouhlasil** s tím Pavel určitě?*  
 ‘Paul did certainly not agree with that?’  
 b. *Prosefoři ještě zřejmě **neodešli**?* / *#**Neodešli** ještě profesoři zřejmě?*  
 ‘Apparently, the professors haven’t yet left?’  
 c. *Vy **nejste** pravděpodobně zdejší?* / *#**Nejste** pravděpodobně zdejší?*  
 ‘You are probably not from here?’
- (18) a. *#Did they certainly agree with that?*  
 b. *#Have they apparently left?*  
 c. *#Are you probably from here?*

### 3.4 Negative polarity items (NPIs)

Three types of negative polarity items can be distinguished in Czech: NI-phrases (*nikdo* ‘nobody’, *nic* ‘nothing’, etc., *žádný* N ‘no N’), weak NPIs (*vůbec* ‘at all’, *seběmenší* ‘the slightest’) and strict NPIs (*ani jeden* ‘not one’), see Dočekal (2016). NI-phrases are only licensed by clausemate negation, i.e. they must be in the scope of sentential negation, see (19a). Weak NPIs are licensed in the context of some downward entailing operator (*yes-no* questions, conditionals, constituent negation etc., see Gajewski 2011). The strict NPI *ani jeden* is grammatical in contexts with local or superordinate negation, see (19b) and (19c), and in contexts with the preposition *bez* ‘without’.<sup>6</sup>

- (19) a. *Nikdo nepotkal / \*potkal v lese medvěda.*  
 nobody neg.met / met in forest bear  
 ‘Nobody met a bear in the forest.’  
 b. *Ani jeden z nich se v lese neztratil / ztratil.*  
 no one of them cl.refl in forest neg.lost / lost  
 ‘Not one of them got lost in the forest.’  
 c. *Nechce, aby se ani jeden ztratil v lese.*  
 neg-wants that cl.refl no one loses in forest  
 ‘He doesn’t want anyone to get lost in the forest.’

<sup>6</sup> It is also sensitive to truth conditions and to the pragmatic part of meaning, which explains that it is not acceptable in all downward entailing contexts (Dočekal 2016).

If we look at NI-phrases in questions, we can observe that negative declarative questions license NI-phrases as subject exactly like negative declarative clauses, while negative interrogatives do not, see (20). Moreover, negative interrogatives in (20a) can only be answered by type A answers, while B answers are possible in (20b). The two contrasts explain if interrogative clauses contain expletive negation and declarative clauses true negation, cf. (13) above.<sup>7</sup>

- (20) a. *Nepotkal \*nikdo / někdo v lese medvěda?*      *Ne / \*Ano, nepotkal.* (he did not)  
          neg.met   nobody / somebody in forest bear      *Ale ano / \*Ne, potkal.* (he did)  
          ‘Did anybody meet a bear in the forest?’  
       b. *Nikdo / někdo nepotkal v lese medvěda?*      *Ano (nikdo).* (nobody did)  
          nobody neg.met / met      in forest bear      *Ne (někdo ho potkal).* (somebody did)  
          ‘Nobody met / Somebody didn’t meet a bear in the forest?’

The contrast observed above needs to be more specified. First, NI-phrases are ungrammatical in interrogative clauses in (20a) and (21a) below, but they are acceptable in (21b), where they are used with focal interpretation. Brown & Franks (1995) argue however that negation cannot be expletive with focal interrogation because the verb doesn’t raise to C (recall that expletive negation in questions is triggered in contexts with Verb(Neg)-raising to C). I claim that the verb in (21b) actually doesn’t raise to C but stays in T, whose specifier is occupied by a null expletive subject (because of the EPP feature). The focused subject stays in Spec-vP. The fact that an overt expletive subject (*von* (‘he’)) can co-occur with the focused subject in (21c) makes this claim plausible.

- (21) a. *Nepotřebuje \*nikdo / někdo pomoci?*  
          neg.needs   nobody / somebody help  
          ‘Does anyone need help?’

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<sup>7</sup> The expletive status of negation can be supported by the behaviour of PPI. The PPI in the sentence (i) is interpreted (as expected) only with the wide scope with respect to negation, while the PPI in the sentence (ii) with V(Neg)-raising is not. I thank Mojmir Dočekal for this observation.

(i) *Někdo nepotkal včera Karla?*      = ‘is there a specific x who did not meet Karel?’  
       somebody neg-met yesterday Karel<sub>acc</sub>  
 (ii) *Nepotkal někdo včera Karla?*      = ‘is there or isn’t there an x who met Karel’  
       neg-met somebody yesterday Karel<sub>acc</sub>

- b. *Nepotřebuje* NIKDO *pomocť*?  
 neg.needs nobody help  
 c. *Von nepotřebuje* NIKDO *pomocť*?  
 he-expl neg.needs nobody help

Second, contrary to NI-phrases, strict NPIs are grammatical in both types of questions, see (22). This contrast parallels Russian *li*-questions in which negation does not license NI-phrases, but triggers Genitive of Negation (see above). I suggest therefore that strict NPIs are licensed before negation moves to the interrogative C, where it loses its negative force. In contrast, NI-phrases must stay in local relation with Negation throughout the derivation. Consequently, expletive negation cannot license NI-phrases at LF, see (23b).

- (22) a. *Nepotřebuje ani jeden z vás pomocť*?  
 doesn't.need any one from you help  
 b. *before Verb(Neg)-raising* : ✓[TP [NegP Neg [vP ... ani ...]]]  
 c. *after Verb(Neg)-raising* : ✓Neg+C [TP ... [NegP [vP ... ani ...]]]  
 (23) a. *before Verb(Neg)-raising*: ✓[TP [NegP Neg [vP ... ni-phrase ...]]]  
 b. *after Verb(Neg)-raising* : \*Neg+C [TP ... [NegP [vP ... ni-phrase ...]]]

Finally, recall that that negation in declarative questions can also have expletive interpretation. This suggests that the verb movement to C can be covert; consequently, we obtain type A answers to negative declarative questions:

- (24) *Doktor není v ordinaci?* => LF: *Není doktor t v ordinaci?*      *Ne (není).*  
 the doctor isn't in his office?      isn't doctor in his office      no (he isn't)

### 3.5 Summary

Negative questions in Czech can be expressed either by using interrogative or declaratives clauses. These two types of clauses behave differently with respect to several properties (presupposition, adverbs, NPIs, see table 2) that can be explained if the sentential negation in interrogative clauses loses its negative force (thus becomes expletive) by virtue of its

movement to the C. Importantly, the distribution of type A and B answers described in section 2 also follows from the distinction between true and expletive negation.

Table 2 : Interrogative vs. declarative negative questions

	Negative interrogatives	Negative declarative questions	
Word order	VSO	SVO	
NI-phrases	*	✓	
Negative presupposition	no	yes	no
Negation	expletive	true	expletive
Answers	A	B	A

#### 4. BACK TO ANSWERS

It is generally assumed (since Laka 1990) that answering particles are generated in the polarity projection ( $\Sigma P$ , PolP) in the CP domain, because they express positive or negative polarity. The concept of the polarity must be nevertheless made clearer in order to account for the mixed behaviour of answering particles in Czech.

I propose to distinguish, following Farkas (2010), between absolute and relative polarity or rather between absolute and relative value of the polarity. In declarative clauses, polarity is a feature that has two absolute values: positive  $[+]$  and negative  $[-]$ . The relation between two polarity values can be called relative polarity. In case of question-answer pairs, relative polarity indicates the relation between the polarity of the question  $[Q]$  and the polarity of the answer  $[A]$ . There are four possible relations: either  $[Q]$  and  $[A]$  have the same positive or negative value, or they have different values, one being positive and the other negative. The basic idea is that the particle *ano* ('yes') expresses the positive value  $[+]$ , or (by default) the relation between two identical values:  $[+,+]$  and  $[-,-] = [+]$ . The particle *ne* ('no') expresses the negative value  $[-]$ , or (by default) the relation between two different values:  $[+,-]$  and  $[-,+] = [-]$ .



- b. *Co myslíte, bude / #nebude François Hollande znovu zvolen prezidentem?*  
 what do you think, will / will not be FH re-elected president  
*Může být, ale také nemusí.*  
 (he) can but (he) also must not ('it could go either way')

- (28) a. (v tramvaji) *Chcete / Nechcete pustit sednout?*  
 (in the tram) would(n't) you like to take my seat  
 b. *Co myslíš, mám / nemám se nechat ostříhat?*  
 what do you think, should(n't) I get my hair cut

As noted by Brown & Franks (1995), negative interrogatives must thus be endowed with some specific communicative and pragmatic value. Negative interrogatives in Czech are actually considered as more polite or less direct than positive ones.<sup>9</sup> I suggest the following explanation for such a politeness effect.<sup>10</sup> A polar question asks the addressee to choose between two alternatives, positive or negative (P or not P), but refusing or saying *no* can be perceived as rude, and therefore difficult to express. By using the negative form of the question, the speaker presents the negative alternative as acceptable and consequently allows the addressee to express his refusal more easily. It is precisely because negation has lost its truth-conditional role that it can play such a role at the discourse level (see Groenendijk & Stokhof 1997).

#### 4.2 Polarity in answers to declaratives clauses

I have said above that declarative clauses have their polarity feature specified. The value of the polarity feature in negative declarative clauses is negative. Likewise, negative declarative clauses used as questions have a negative polarity value. That's why they convey a negative presupposition (see section 3.1). The answer confirms or disconfirms

<sup>9</sup> See Leech (2014:167) for negation as a "a strategy to express a degree of polite indirectness".

<sup>10</sup> A similar effect can be observed with *Negation Raising*. The sentences *Nemyslím, že s tím bude souhlasit* ('I don't think he will agree with that') and *Myslím, že s tím nebude souhlasit* ('I think he will not agree with that') are semantically (i.e. the negation is interpreted in the embedded clause), but only the raised negation adds a politeness effect to the sentence interpretation.



this negative presupposition. Consequently, the particles only indicate relative polarity, i.e. relation between the polarity of the question and that of the answer.<sup>11</sup>

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (29) Oni ten návrh nepřijali <sub>[-]</sub> ?<br>they didn't accept the proposal | $[_{\text{PolP}} \text{Ano}_{[-,-]} [_{\text{Pol}'} [-] [_{\text{XP}} \emptyset]]]$ (= nepřijali)<br>yes (= they didn't accept the proposal)<br>$[_{\text{PolP}} \text{Ne}_{[-,+]} [_{\text{Pol}'} [-] [_{\text{XP}} \emptyset]]]$ (= přijali)<br>no (= they accepted the proposal) |
|--|---|

Importantly, this analysis can be extended to positive questions conveying a positive presupposition, as in (30). But there will be no difference at surface between answers expressing absolute polarity and those expressing relative polarity. In both (25) above and (30) below, the positive answer will be expressed by “*ano* + positive verb”, and the negative answer by “*ne* + negative verb”. The mixed behaviour of the particles can therefore be only observed with negative questions.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (30) Oni ten návrh přijali <sub>[+]</sub> ?<br>they accepted the proposal | $[_{\text{PolP}} \text{Ano}_{[+,+]} [_{\text{Pol}'} [+] [_{\text{XP}} \emptyset]]]$ (= přijali)<br>yes (= they accepted the proposal)<br>$[_{\text{PolP}} \text{Ne}_{[+,-]} [_{\text{Pol}'} [+] [_{\text{XP}} \emptyset]]]$ (= nepřijali)<br>no (= they didn't accept the proposal) |
|---|---|

Particles are therefore not ambiguous, but their felicitous use depends on the felicitous interpretation of the question. This can be resolved by using specific prosody schemes to indicate biased or focused interpretation. Finally, the proposed analysis predicts that the mixed behaviour of particles can be observed in languages in which negation raising to a particular C leads to its expletive interpretation and in which declarative clauses can be used as questions. This prediction seems comes true e.g. for Russian and Spanish (see

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<sup>11</sup> *Ano* in (29) cannot be itself (without *ale* ‘but’) interpreted as “they did accept”. *Ne* is theoretically ambiguous, but in practice, the ambiguity will be resolved by the intonation of both question and answer (see section 3.2., ex. (16) and (16’)), and section 3.4 ex. (24)).

Gruet-Skrabalova 2014), as shown in (31) and (32) respectively<sup>12</sup>. This issue is however out of the scope of this paper and must be left to future research.

- |      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| (31) | a. <i>Ne priexali li roditeli domoj?</i><br>neg came PART parents at-home<br>b. <i>Roditeli <b>ne</b> priexali domoj?</i><br>parents neg came home    | <i>Net, ne priexali. // Da, priexali.</i><br>no, neg came      yes, came<br><i>DA ne priexali. // NET, priexali.</i><br>yes neg came      no      came |
| (32) | a. <i>¿No están en casa los padres?</i><br>aren't at home the parents<br>b. <i>¿Los padres <b>no</b> están en casa?</i><br>the parents aren't at home | <i>No, no están. // Si, están.</i><br>no, they aren't      yes, they are<br><i>?SI, no están. // NO, están.</i><br>YES, they aren't // NO, they are    |

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have dealt with answers to negative *yes-no* questions, focusing on data from Czech. I have shown that answering particles can express both positive and negative answers to negative questions, but that their distribution depends on the semantic and syntactic properties of questions. I have argued that negation in questions loses its negative force when it moves to the interrogative head C and behaves thus as expletive negation. Consequently, I have distinguished between two types of negative questions: (i) negative interrogative clauses that contain an initial negative verb and expletive negation, and that do not convey a negative presupposition, and (ii) negative declarative clauses used as questions, that contain a non initial negative verb and true negation, and that convey a negative presupposition. Following this syntactic and semantic distinction, I have shown that negative interrogatives receive the same answers as positive interrogatives (*yes* in case of positive answer and *no* in case of negative answer), while negative declaratives used as questions are confirmed by *yes* (corresponding to a negative answer) and denied by *no* (corresponding to a positive answer). I have explained this distribution by proposing that the particles express absolute polarity in answers to interrogative questions, whose polarity is open and must be fixed by the particle, and relative polarity in answers to declarative questions, whose polarity has been already specified.

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<sup>12</sup> These examples come from my Russian and Spanish informants.

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*Abstract:* This paper deals with answers to negative yes-no questions, focusing on data from Czech. It is shown that answering particles can express both positive and negative answers to negative questions, but that their choice is not free. Several pieces of evidence are discussed in order to show that the use of the particles depends on the interpretation of negation in the question, which can either be expletive or true. This semantic distinction is furthermore tightly linked to the syntactic position of the negation, according to which we distinguish between negative interrogative clauses and negative declarative clauses used as questions. An analysis in terms of absolute and relative polarity is proposed to account for the mixed behaviour of answering particles: particles express absolute polarity in answers to interrogative questions, whose polarity is open, and relative polarity in answers to declarative questions, whose polarity has been already specified.

*Keywords:* yes-no questions; answer; answering particles; negation; polarity.