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Affirmative and negative particles as *special answers*

Abstract

In this work, I analyze the properties of the affirmative/negative particles *sì* (yes) and *no* (no) in Italian. I focus on cases I dub ***special answers*** – as a parallel with Obenauer’s (2006) *special questions* – where they are **NOT used as responses to yes-no questions, or to confirm or deny a proposition p**. In these cases, they serve an **expressive function**. I present here a syntactic account of these particles, further elucidating the relationship between syntax and pragmatics, and developing the hypotheses discussed in previous works on expressive language, such as **surprise and disapproval sentences**.

Roadmap

- Introduction and state of the art
- Expressive ***si*** and ***no***
- Research questions
- Expressive language: Special questions and special answers
- Theoretical framework
- The hypothesis
- Discussion and conclusions

Why is this interesting?

- Because it is interesting to see how our grammar tools might be extended to explain expressive language, i.e., to extend the boundaries of our descriptive and theoretical knowledge.
- Because it is interesting to see how simple particles, such as *yes* and *no*, are actually quite complex expressions
- Because complex issues tell us a lot about language and human cognition

Sì and *no* in Italian

- *Sì* and *no* are affirmative and negative particles used to answer polar questions:

(1) *È partito Gianni?*

Did Gianni leave?

(2) *Sì* (, *è partito*)

Yes (he left)

(3) *No* (, *non è partito*)

No (he did not leave)

- *Sì* and *no* are used to confirm or deny a proposition p proposed by the interlocutor:

(1) Gianni è partito

Gianni left

(2) Sì (, è vero)

Yes (it is true)

(3) No (, non è vero)

No (it is not true)

- Poletto and Zanuttini (2013:124) «The ability to answer a question or contradict a previously made assertion is a characteristic property of polarity particles, as defined in Farkas (2009, 2010), and Italian *sì* and *no* are polarity particles.»

The systems for affirming or denying vary significantly across languages.

- Italian has a two-form system
- Shakespearian English had a four-form system: positive and negative answers to positive questions – *yea* and *nay* – and positive-negative answers to negative questions – *yes* and *no* (Crystal & Crystal, 2004)
- German, and several Germanic languages, have a three-form system: *ja, nein, doch*
- Some languages have various *echo* systems: Latin, Finnish, Thai (Holmberg 2016)
- Japanese has an *agree-disagree* system, which looks like a polarity system like the Italian, but is not.
- Latin used particles as well – *ita, sic* (so) – and adverbs – *maxime, certe* (Potočnik 2023)

- The existence of these differences across languages, in particular, the fact that there are two, three and four term systems, shows that **a pure polarity approach might be insufficient**
- See Farkas & Roelofsen (2012) [+ - same] and [+ - reverse] feature system
- See also Krifka (2013) for multiple propositional discourse referents

- **I will not address the issue of *multi-term systems – negative questions* – here and refer to the existing literature on the topic.**
- It is necessary to encode in the system a sensitivity to the previous context
- The previous context – for instance, being a positive or negative question – in some way determines the lexical choice of the answering particle.

Two theoretical perspectives on **yes** and **no**

- Krifka (2013:18): «**Response particles** like *yes* and *no* are **anaphoric elements** that pick up **propositional discourse referents** that are introduced by preceding sentences.»
- Holmberg (2016:1): «answers to yes–no questions, even when they consist of just one word, are **derived by ellipsis** from full sentential expressions. For example, the affirmative answer in (1) is derived by ellipsis of the bracketed clause as shown in (1). The elided (unpronounced) clause is essentially identical to the clause in the question, which is why it can be elided:
 - (1) Yes [~~John is coming~~]

Yes, but...

(1) Gianni ha perso l'aereo

Gianni missed the plane

- (oh) no!

regret

*I am sorry he missed the plane/ *he didn't miss the plane*

(2) Gianni ha vinto la gara

Gianni won the race

- Nooo!

surprise

*I did not expect him to win the race/ *he didn't win*

(1) Gianni è arrivato tardi

Gianni was late

- No no (, così non va bene)

disapproval

no no (, that's not good)

*Speaker disapproves of Gianni's arriving late/*it is not true that...*

(2) Gianni è arrivato tardi

- E no! (Di nuovo?)

strong disapproval

and no (again?)

*Speaker is indignant/*it is not true that...*

(1) Ho deciso di (non) partire

I decided (not) to leave

- Ma sì! (but yes)

approval

*speaker approves / *it is true that you decided (not) to leave*

(2) Gianni ha comprato una Lamborghini

Gianni bought a Lamborghini

- Səə (yes, *V* lower, central, nasalized, long) **disbelief**

- Sì, Ciao! (yes, bye)

- sì, te saluto (Roman dialect, Yes, *I greet you*)

*Speaker doesn't believe it/ *It is true that ...*

- (2) Gianni è arrivato tardi

Gianni was late

- E sì! (Di nuovo?)

strong disapproval

and yes (again?)

*Speaker is indignant/*it is true that...*

- I propose that affirmative and negative particles in these cases are used as **special answers**, drawing a parallel with **special questions** (Obenauer 2004, 2006).
- **Special answers, as special questions, express an emotional meaning**
- I.e., an evaluation by the speaker on the propositional content
- If we want to maintain a compositional approach to meaning, we have to address the problem of their syntactic representation.

- The ones above are **expressive usages** of the affirmative and negative particles
- Independently of the theory adopted, **they neither affirm nor negate p .**
- **Research questions:**
 - Do they negate or affirm something at all?
 - If they do, what is it?
 - How can these structures be represented syntactically?
 - What is the relationship between the peculiar realization of these particles (phonological realization, intonation, gestures) and their syntax?

- Interestingly, each of the nuances given above is associated with **characteristic intonation and gesture**.
- Native speakers immediately recognize whether *yes* and *no* in the contexts provided above are a “real” affirmative or negative particles, or **expressive usages**.
- Native speakers also unambiguously recognize **which** kind of **emotion** is being expressed.
- For instance, in the context:
 - (1) Gianni ha vinto la gara (G. won the race)
 - The answer “Nooo”, unambiguously means “surprise”
 - The answer “Səəə”, unambiguously means “disbelief”

- Furthermore, the fact that the lexical item in some cases is not exactly the same, as in the case of “Səəə”, means that the lexical representation itself must be richer than a simple polarity. The one cannot be substituted for the other.
- NB: in English this particular usage is expressed by means of the lexical item *yeah – yeah yeah* – and not by means of *yes*.
- Therefore, we have to adopt **a more complex syntax because, presumably, they do not occupy the same position**

Special questions

- Obenauer (2006) analyzed a subset of rhetorical questions, which he referred to as “**special questions.**” Special questions have an expressive function.
- Obenauer & Poletto (2000), Munaro & Obenauer (1999), Munaro & Poletto (2003)
- Giorgi (2018), Giorgi and Dal Farra (2019) and Giorgi & Petrocchi (2024), Furlan (2019), Marchetiello (2022):
Surprise and surprise-disapproval questions

- **Surprise:** I know that you are on a diet and decided to eat only fruit. One day I see you eating a big hamburger. I am surprised and utter:

(1) Ma non mangiavi solo frutta?

‘But weren’t you eating only fruit?’

- **Disapproval:** I see Gianni wearing his best trousers kneeling in the dirt in the garden. I think that he will ruin his trousers. I am annoyed and utter:

(2) Ma cosa fai?!

‘But what are you doing?!’

- These questions do not require a canonical answer.
- For instance, answering *yes* or *no* to a surprise question would be nonsensical.
- The speaker by uttering the special question has two goals:
 - to **express her feelings** (surprise/ disapproval) and
 - to **obtain an explanation** for the unexpected behavior.
- **We do not react to *special questions* in the same way we would to *normal* ones.**
- **Importantly: These sentences should be infelicitous and even ungrammatical. They are grammatical because they are interpreted as special questions**

- Special questions are correctly understood because they are associated with
- **Characteristic intonation**
- **Characteristic co-speech gestures.**
- Co-speech gestures in surprise – i.e., counter-expectational special questions– and surprise-disapproval questions have been studied in Italian (Giorgi 2016; 2018; Giorgi and Dal Farra 2019,); Spanish (Furlan 2019); German (Dal Farra, Giorgi and Hinterhölzl, 2018); Neapolitan (Marchetiello 2022); Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese (Petrocchi 2022).

- Our research on expressive language has revealed striking cross-linguistic similarities across languages, in particular in the non-manual gestures associated with emotions such as surprise and disapproval. (Giorgi & Petrocchi 2024)
- **How can intonation and gesture fit into a linguistic (minimalist) model?**

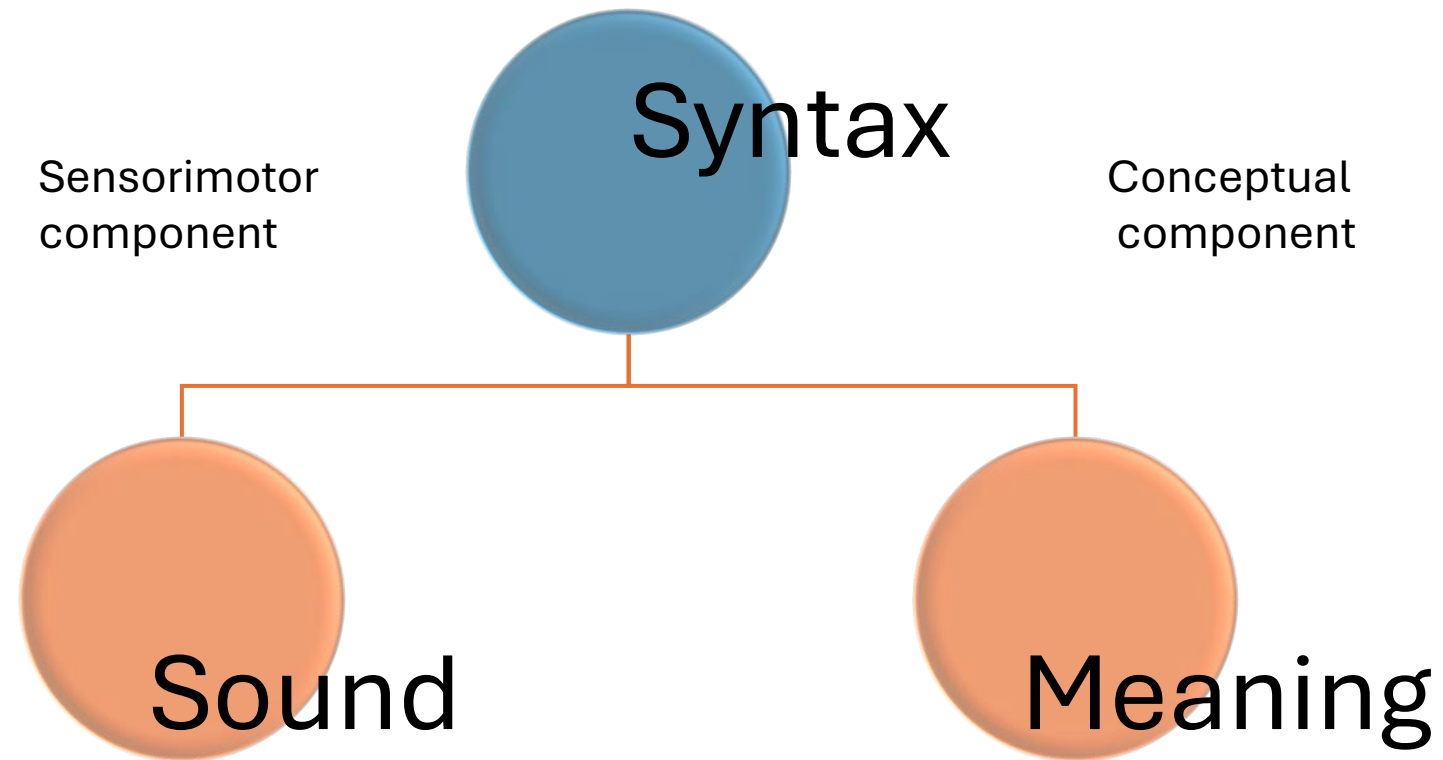
Hypothesis

- To sum up:
- Surprise and disapproval questions would be *ungrammatical* if not associated with special **intonation** and **gesture**.
- Such an association permits the correct interpretation.
- The **trigger** is already **encoded in the syntactic representation**.
- We collected experimental evidence in favor of this view.

The Minimalist model

- In Generative Grammar the role of sentence representation – i.e., syntax – is a central one. (Chomsky 1995, 2003, 2008 and subsequent works).
- Syntax connects Phonology and Interpretation (sound and meaning).
- **There is no direct relation between sound and meaning.**
- Hence, syntax must feed both the sensorimotor interface and the conceptual one.

The Minimalist Model



- The hypothesis concerning the absence of a direct relation between sound and meaning has important consequences.
- A theory **including** such a relation would be **more powerful** than a theory excluding it.
- Hence, such a theory would be **less restrictive** and, therefore, **disfavored**.
- **A more restrictive theory makes predictions that are easier to falsify.**
- **Therefore, it is epistemologically preferable.**

- To exemplify, capitalizing on the discussion in Giorgi (2023), let's consider a simple case of **yes-no question** in Italian, with a post-verbal subject, a possibility available to pro-drop languages, as the following one:

(1) E' arrivato Gianni

lit: is arrived Gianni

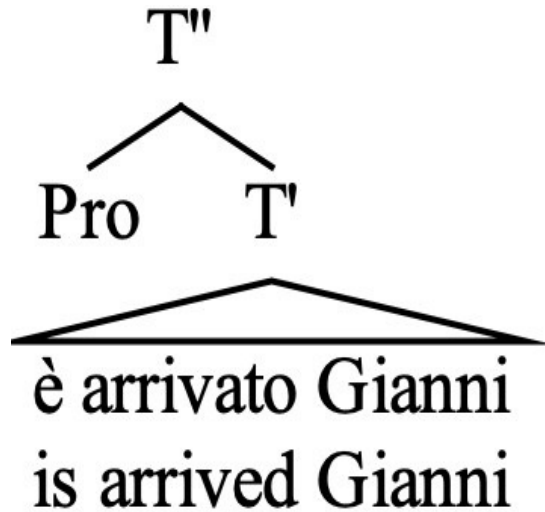
- Gianni arrived

- Did Gianni arrive?

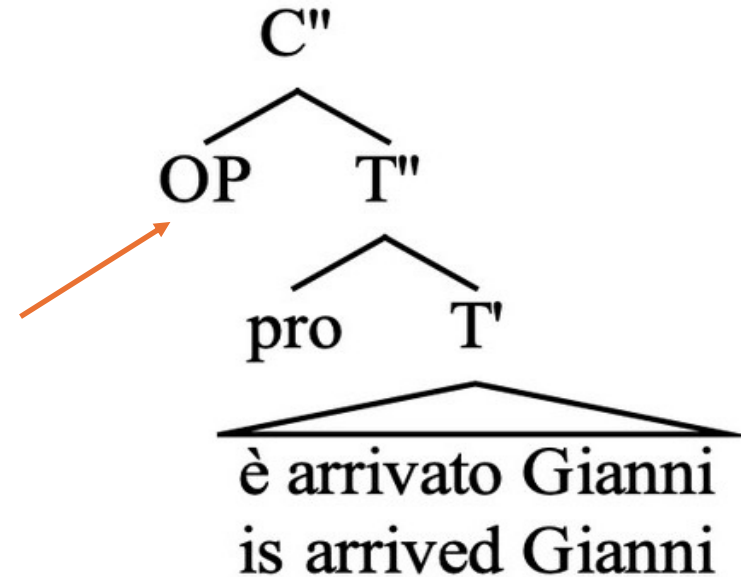
- This sentence can be associated with **two intonations**, each corresponding to a different interpretation: the interrogative intonation, giving rise to a yes-no question, and the affirmative intonation, giving rise to an assertion

- However, in generative grammar, since the development of the transformational approach (Chomsky, 1975), the two meanings, and consequently the two phonological realizations, are associated with different syntactic representations:

- (1)



- (2)



- There is an **empty category – OP** – in the syntactic representation that **triggers the interrogative intonation**
- **Syntax mediates the relationship between sound and meaning:** The empty operator creates the relevant difference between the two structures and can thus be seen as the trigger for the prosodic realization on one hand and the intended interpretation on the other.

- **Hypothesis**
- I propose that the same holds for expressive language in general.
- In expressive language intonation and gestuality play an important role
- **The sensorimotor realization is triggered by syntactic cues and results in a multimodal realization of the sentence associated with the special emotional interpretation.**

- Going back to surprise and disapproval special questions.
- The representation of a non-emotional adversative sentence, such as:

(1) *Maria è ricca, ma non è felice*


Maria is rich, but she is not happy

is the following one:

(2) [_{DIS} [_{CP} Maria è ricca] [**ma** _{DIS} [_{CP} non è felice]]

Maria is rich **but** she is not happy

- *Ma* is a discourse head, connecting two sentences (Giorgi 2018)

- When there is an emotional content, there is an extra-layer in the syntax (Cinque 1999), namely an ***evaluative projection***:
- [_{DIS} [CP ...] [**ma** _{DIS} [_{EVAL} [WH- []]]]]

- The evaluative projection is not filled by lexical material but is read at sensorimotor interface as an instruction for intonation and co-speech gestures
- The presence Eval gives rise to the expressive meaning

- The portion on the left of *ma* is silent in surprise and disapproval question :
- (1) [_{DIS} [**CP ...**] [**ma** _{DIS} [_{EVAL} [WH- []]]]]
- the speaker's *expectations* in these cases are retrievable from the context.
- In other words: the fact that the speaker's expectations are not met, determines an evaluation by the speaker as surprise and/or disapproval

- Summarizing
- In surprise and disapproval questions, the speakers' expectations are part of the syntactic (and lexical) content provided by *ma*. They are contextually retrieved.
- For instance (Giorgi 2018 and following works): my friend Mary tells me that she bought a wonderful new red dress for tomorrow's party. Once at the party, I see that she wears a blue dress. I am surprised and utter:

(1) **Ma** non era rosso? (but wasn't it red?)

As discussed above, the syntax for (1) is (2):


(2) [_{DIS} [**CP ...**] [**ma** _{DIS} [_{EVAL} [WH- []]]]]

Where the speaker's expectations are represented in the specifier of the discourse head *ma*

- An evaluative head is present, providing the right flavour

- Going back to ***sì*** and ***no***:
- Following Holmberg's approach, I propose an ellipsis **analysis**.
but
- I also propose that these sentences include an **evaluative projection EVAL** – an *extra-layer* – in the left periphery :

(1) [Sì/No [_{EVAL-P} EVAL° [~~Gianni ha deciso di partire~~]



- Eval is read off at the interfaces and mediates between the phonological realization and the interpretation.

- However, this does not explain everything, in particular, **it does not explain why for certain emotions we have *sì* and for other ones we have *no***
- Going back to the initial research questions: is there anything which the speaker wants to deny or to affirm?
- And if so, what is it?

- As in the case of special questions, in special answers the extra-layer connects the propositional content with the speaker's attitude toward that content.
- In the case of the *surprise* answer – *nooo* – the speaker, as said before, is neither denying p ,
- *nor* is he accusing the interlocutor of lying
- Surprise is due to a mismatch between the speaker's **expectations** and what the speaker observes or comes to know.

- Beside the answer *nooo*, in fact, it is possible to have:

(1) **Ma** nooo

Where ma can be silent, as in surprise special questions.

- In other words, (1) means: my expectation was for Gianni *not* to win the race. The expectation is instantiated by *ma* (or by a corresponding silent head)
- Hence, **my expectations are *not* met and I am surprised.**
- Therefore, ***nooo* denies the expectation, simultaneously expressing surprise**
- The conjunction **e** might serve a similar purpose.

Concluding

- **Going back to the research questions:**

(1) Do affirmative and negative particles in Italian negate or affirm something at all?

- **Yes, they do**

(2) If they do, what is it?

- **The expectations: *Ma no! Nooo, Ma sì*, i.e. surprise, disapproval, approval**

- **The evaluative head: *Oh no!* regret**

- As far as the disbelief affirmative particle, *səəə*, or *sì ciao*, the issue might be more complex. Intuitively, it resembles a **(counterfactual) conditional: *if this were true, I would go away, hence the ciao, or the te saluto.***

(3) How can these structures be represented syntactically?

- **There are dedicated projections in the syntax**

(4) What is the relationship between the peculiar realization of these particles (phonological realization, intonation, gestures) and their syntax?

- **To be studied (there is a mini-pilot about that)**

...to be continued...

Thank you!