

How ambiguous are response particles? The role of prosody and type of antecedent clause

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As responses to negative sentences, the response particles *yes* and *no* in principle are ambiguous. Speakers may agree with a negative assertion like *Pete hasn't won the race* by replying *Yes/No, he hasn't*, and they might reject such an assertion by replying *Yes/No, he has*. The source of the ambiguity lies in the double function that the response particles fulfil. They can indicate the polarity of the response clause (*yes* – positive, *no* – negative), and they can indicate the truth of the antecedent (*yes* – the antecedent is true, *no* – the antecedent is false). Recent research has shown that languages differ in how far speakers accept the use of both particles in both functions. However, the differences mostly manifest themselves in graded preferences rather than in dichotomous choices. So, the ambiguity seems to be quite pervasive. It has also been shown that there is great inter-individual variation within most of the languages that have been investigated so far: Speakers of the same language differ in their judgements concerning the acceptability of the two particles in the two functions, such that e.g. in German some speakers make a clear choice of a certain sort, other speakers make the opposite choice and for yet other speakers the particles seem to be completely ambiguous.

The present talk investigates three aspects of the ambiguity of *yes* and *no* in German (*ja, nein*). First, it explores the task dependency of the ambiguity by comparing acceptance patterns with interpretation and production choices. It shows that preferences are influenced by the task and that some of the ambiguity is resolved, which can be explained by general pragmatic principles. Second, the talk explores the role of prosody as a disambiguating factor and shows that speakers who use the same particle for different functions produce slightly different prosodies for these functions. However, the effects are quite small and arguably are not sufficient to be picked up by listeners. Third, the study explores the role of context by looking at different kinds of antecedents. It shows that for negative questions with different biases or with no bias – and hence (by hypothesis) with a different semantic-pragmatic meaning of the negation – the ambiguity of *ja* and *nein* is partly resolved.