

Variations of Responses to Negative Yes/No Questions on the *CNN Larry King Live Show*

HARUKAWA, Shuko
(University of Hyogo)

1. Introduction

Many Japanese learners of English regard English negative yes/no questions as the most challenging form of question in the English language because the way to answer an English negative yes/no question is the opposite of the way to answer a Japanese negative question, which makes it quite easy to make mistakes. Harukawa (2012) illustrated that English native speakers did not necessarily respond according to the rules of English grammar. The examples which were found from corpora and from a textbook make it clear that many English negative yes/no questions were found which were answered with neither “yes” nor “no” to the given proposition, but instead, as an answer to the interrogator’s presupposition. Also, it was revealed that irregular responses occurred when native speakers responded to negative yes/no questions which had a negative bias. This irregular method of responding sometimes happens when an interrogator answers to negative yes/no questions.

Based on the previous study, this communication research using a negative yes/no question was done from a new angle. For yes/no questions, the response should always be either an affirmation or a negation (Leech & Svartvik, 1998). However, in authentic conversations, yes/no questions are not always answered by “yes” or “no” (Imai & Nakajima, 1978). It is not rare to hear a response from a native speaker that begins neither with “yes” nor “no,” when responding to a negative yes/no question, even though grammatically it should start with “yes” or “no” and should then optionally be followed by a sentence which provides more details or additional information. In this study, the forms of the responses to negative yes/no questions and affirmative yes/no questions in actual conversations will be quantitatively examined. Negative yes/no questions and the responses to these questions which do not follow the prescriptive grammatical rules will be thoroughly examined and analyzed from the viewpoint of communication.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to review the results of previous studies about English negative questions and answers, in addition to studies about the communicative aspects of negative questions.

In communicative grammar, Leech and Svartvik (1998) compared declarative and interrogative sentences and analyzed yes/no questions from the perspective of communications. They found that responses are caused by both declarative and

interrogative sentences in conversation, and the responses give the speaker the information that they need (p. 184). For a yes/no question, only one of two answers is possible, an affirmation or a negation (p. 185). Machida (2010) inspected multiple ways to answer negative sentences in English. He pointed out that the issue is not simply a conflict between a negative sentence and a positive sentence. According to Machida, a negative sentence exists as an expression that shows that the situation described in a positive sentence is assumed to be false. Therefore, negation is an act of denial that denies the entire situation or condition (p. 18).

Horn (1989) and Takahara (2003) referred to the function of negation. A negative yes/no question has a complicated function that is interpreted semantically due to other words in the context (p. 281).

Terakado and Sato (2008) studied the differences between Japanese, English, and German in the way of responding to negative yes/no questions. They found that the differences originate from the speaker's situational assessment, which becomes a presupposition when a negative question is addressed. Affirmative interrogatives are the same in English and Japanese, but for negative yes/no questions, the difference is that in Japanese, when a question is constructed, there is no presupposition that the expected response will be affirmative (p. 89). They argued that usually an expected situation is expressed as an affirmative sentence, and a negative sentence appears only when an unusual situation arises. An affirmative sentence usually expresses the way things are or the way that things exist in a normal situation. However, negation is not merely the opposite of affirmation because all judgments in language are subject to value judgments, and affirmation and negation in language are fundamentally dependent on the value judgments of the speaker (p. 97).

Murata and Narita (1996) also argued that the function of negative questions is not neutral. Instead, negative questions are always either positively biased or negatively biased. When a negative yes/no question has a positive bias, the speaker believes or at least expects that a positive answer is correct. On the other hand, when a negative yes/no question has a negative bias, the speaker believes or at least expects that a negative answer is correct. For example, the following three sentences have a negative bias because the interrogators of these questions expect that the responses will be negative (p. 7 - 8).

- (1) Don't you believe me?
- (2) Can't you drive straight?
- (3) Hasn't the train left yet? [p. 7 - 8]

A negative bias occurs when the speaker faces a situation in which he/she expects an affirmative answer, but it is not given. For example, if a person had a very doubtful expression on his/her face, the other person might say (1) above. This utterance can

be interpreted as “I thought that you believed me.” This kind of question indicates the interrogator’s surprise, disappointment, or confusion (p. 8).

Clancy (2002) stated that negative questions are often delivered in stimulus-response situations. The function of negative questions is often a means of expressing surprise or disbelief. (p. 88 - 90).

Kodani (2002) researched through drama how questions and answers are performed in dialogs. He found that negative questions have two kinds of usages: one is to confirm the affirmative concept (“yes” is expected) and the other is to confirm a negative concept (“no” is expected). It is clear which usage is used according to the context and its situation. The answer is “yes” if the respondent approves of the proposition, and the answer is “no” if he/she is opposed to the proposition (p. 188 - 189).

Kamio and Takami (1998) cited to negative questions as one of three special features of English utterance style. The “territory theory” states that manifestation of territory is found in human language (p. 3). For example:

- (4) a. That lady is my mother.
- b. Isn’t that lady your mother?
- c. You went to Okinawa last summer.

Sentence (4)a only consist of the information that the speaker knows, but (4)b consist of information that both the speaker and the listener share. On the other hand, (4)c consists of information that only the listener knows. According to Kamio and Takami, information belongs to the speaker’s and/or the listener’s “territory” because the interrogators of these questions expect that the responses will be negative. They claimed that in negative English questions, the extent of “territory” differs between the speaker and the listener.

Kamio (1979) argued that the territory theory has an important element in irregular responses for negative yes/no questions because in English grammar, fundamentally, when a question is answered with “yes,” it means “correct,” while “no” means “incorrect.” When the territory is shared by the interrogator and the respondent, the respondent who agrees with the content of the proposition answers “yes” to show his/her agreement about whether the proposition is correct or incorrect. In other words, it sometimes happens that the respondent is affected by the interrogator’s intent and knowledge because they have common information and the respondent already knows the truth of the proposition when the interrogator asks with a form of a negative question (p. 213-231).

Bald (1980) surveyed the functions which “yes” and “no” have as responses in English conversations, what they mean, and the correlations with intonation. Bald found that

with the exception of one type of context, and as long as the choice of intonation does not counteract it, “yes” and “no” signal agreement and disagreement, respectively, in all of the instances that they examined (p. 190). He explained that the most neutral context calling for a response is a yes/no question. However, negative yes/no questions usually imply surprise or disbelief (p.191). Also, Bald found a tendency that “yes” responses occur far more frequently than “no” responses. One reason is that there is a preponderance of positive statements in his data and “yes” usually tends to occur after positive statements. But another factor is represented by the type of text. For example, an interview situation prompts the interviewee to agree rather than disagree with the interviewer (p. 190).

In pragmatics of communicative competence, the most influential concepts are the “cooperative principle (Grice, 1975, 1989).” The “cooperative principle” is a principle about the specific context of an utterance, especially when not expressed with words. In negative questions, both semantic and pragmatic presuppositions are implied in the speaker’s utterance. In communication, even in negative questions, the cooperative principle is fundamentally observed by speakers and listeners involved in the dialog. Higashimori and Yoshimura (2003) recognized that Grice’s cooperative principle is one of the most recognized theories in pragmatics. Grice claimed that a normal conversation is generally a collective action, and that both speaker and listener recognize some purposes and directivity in their conversation. Although the purposes can change from being clear to unclear, and may change as the conversation progresses, there are purposes and directivity at each stage of a conversation (p. 25).

The cooperative principle appears in unique ways in conversations. A conversational maxim is composed of the following four rules which were proposed by Grice (1975, 1989):

1. Maxim of Quality

Be Truth • Do not say what you believe to be false.

- Do not say things for which you lack adequate evidence.

2. Maxim of Quantity

Quantity of Information

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

3. Maxim of Relevance

- Be relevant.

4. Maxim of Manner

Be Clear • Avoid obscurity of expression.

- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid being unnecessarily verbose).
- Be orderly.

Kato (2004) claimed that Grice's cooperative principle was an epoch-making discovery because it focuses on conversation as the primary subject. Kato said that Grice deserves high praise for taking conversation analysis to a new level where it is treated as a dynamic exchange.

The "relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995)" is also influential concept of communication. The relevance theory is the theory that when an utterance is spoken, the listener will search for meaning, and having found the meaning that fits his/her expectation of relevance, will stop processing the utterance. As Kato (2004) indicated, this theory emphasizes interpretation of utterances, with the implicatures proposed by Grice (1975, 1989). Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) proposed a new relevance theory, which is derived from the inference model proposed by Grice (1975). Kato (2004) stated that fundamentally, the relevance theory aims to explain how inference functions as an utterance are interpreted (p. 88). Sperber and Wilson argue that in language communication, the listener understands the speaker's intentions from inference which is drawn from the context which was obtained from the interpretation of the linguistic meaning of the speaker. Higashimori and Yoshimura (2003) also proposed that the relevance theory is a corrected inference model because inference plays a crucial role in an utterance interpretation (p. 11). Sperber and Wilson (1995) proposed a theory of "communicated assumption," in which transmitting an assumption occurs when both speaker and listener actualize the assumption. Carston (1998) explained that communicated assumption means that a speaker makes an assumption so that the listener may take up on the true intentions of the speaker out of various possibilities of recognition. According to Carston (1998), communicated assumption is an assumption in which the speaker shows clear intention that the speaker is going to convey to a listener. Sperber and Wilson (1995) stated that utterances serve as a starting point of a listener's inference, and lead towards a certain direction. In verbal communication, the inference about what the speaker is going to transmit is initiated by an utterance as a stimulus. In utterance interpretation, Higashimori and Yoshimura argued that the contributions the linguistic meaning makes are very limited. Consequently, they claimed that it leads to a new subject of pragmatics and inference playing a more significant role (p. 6).

In rules of conversation, speech-act is equally important as Grice (1975, 1989) and Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995). Austin (1962) coined the term 'speech-act' and conceived the speech-act theory as a new norm. It is indicated that the act with utterances was extracted from the illocutionary force.

locutionary act - the act of saying something

Illocutionary act - making an assertion, giving an order, and promising to do something. To execute an illocutionary act is to use a locution with a certain force. It is an act executed in saying something,

perlocutionary act - An act is executed by saying something. Notice that if one successfully executed a perlocution, one also succeeds in executing both an illocution and a locution.

In the theory of speech acts, attention has especially focused on the illocutionary act, much less on the locutionary and perlocutionary act. Three classifications of a speech act called the locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act affected the world not only linguistics but sociology, informatics, and other disciplines as well.

3. Hypothesis

In this study, the validity of the following hypothesis is examined: In natural conversations among English native speakers, negative yes/no questions are answered by various responses without yes/no at a higher rate than affirmative yes/no questions, even though yes/no questions are answered by yes/no grammatically (Leech & Svartvik, 1998). The forms of the responses to negative questions in actual conversations will be quantitatively examined.

4. Method of Study

Two hundred affirmative yes/no questions with answers and 200 negative yes/no questions with answers were extracted from dialogs. The questions were categorized as to whether the form of each question was “responses with yes/no” or “various responses without yes/no to question. The conversations for this research were from the Larry King Live Corpus, from January 1 to May 10th, 2008.

Conditions of the questions (cf. Imai & Nakajima, 1978):

They must

1. Include a negative word such as “not.”
2. Be a yes/no question.
(A clear polar answer is expected when the question is uttered.)
3. Be followed immediately by an answer.
4. Be answered clearly and specifically when the question is in a conversation in which several people are engaged.
5. Not be an alternative question which has the word “or.”

5. Results and Analyses

Generally, negative yes/no questions have a much lower frequency of occurrence than affirmative yes/no questions. In addition, in many cases, negative yes/no questions became questions with no answers because they turned out to be self-questioning sentences that the speaker uttered to him/herself or because the explanations were given by the speaker after the

question, to either reinforce or reinstate what the speaker tried to ask.

“Sure” and “absolutely” were also common answers, and the questions that transpired from them were categorized as various responses without yes/no because those answers were not polar answers. “It does,” “we do,” etc. were also common answers, and the questions that led to such responses were categorized as responses with yes/no because these answers imply the answer of “yes.” The results are shown below:

- | | | |
|-------------------|---|-------------|
| 1. Affirmative | Various responses without yes/no | 114 (57.0%) |
| yes/no questions: | Responses with yes/no | 86 (43.0%) |
| 2. Negative | Various responses without yes/no | 147 (73.5%) |
| yes/no questions: | Responses with yes/no | 53(26.5%) |

1-1 Examples of “Various responses **without** yes/no to **affirmative** yes/no questions”

- ① Interviewer: Do you want to hold it?
 Interviewee: Feel this here.
- ② Interviewer: Do they have a pouch?
 Interviewee: They have a pouch.

1-2 Examples of “Responses **with** yes/no to **affirmative** yes/no questions”

- ③ Interviewer: Did you ride a long way?
 Interviewee: No. Around the circle once before ...
- ④ Interviewer: Are you saying she is out of it?
 Interviewee: No, I would never say that ...

2-1 Examples of “Various responses **without** yes/no to **negative** yes/no questions”

- 1 Interviewer: Don't most men feel that way?
 Interviewee: Well, there's of course that issue...
- 2 Interviewer: Hasn't he now explained it all?
 Interviewee: I think this will be coming up in a debate...

2-2 Examples of “Responses **with** yes/no to **negative** yes/no questions”

- 3 Interviewer: You're not afraid?
 Interviewee: No, I'm not afraid.
- 4 Interviewer: Governor, wasn't the Democratic party generally regarded
 as the party of the little guy?
 Interviewee: Yes, they might be.

Affirmative yes/no questions were numerous and appeared in 200 conversations which met all the conditions between January 1st and February 15th in LKL Corpus. On the other hand, as for the negative yes/no questions, it took a very long time to extract and review suitable questions more than four months duration.

A two-way *chi-squared* test was conducted on the frequencies of responses with yes/no and

various responses without yes/no in affirmative yes/no questions and negative yes/no questions. Table 1 below shows that the frequency of various responses without yes/no was statistically significant, and within various responses without yes/no, negative yes/no questions had a greater frequency than affirmative yes/no questions. Also, Table 1 shows that the difference between various responses without yes/no and responses with yes/no among negative yes/no questions is larger than the difference between various responses without yes/no and responses with yes/no among affirmative yes/no questions ($\chi^2 = 12.007$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$).

Table 1
Cross-Sectional Models of Answers and Questions

			Question	
			Affirmative	Negative
Answer	Responses with yes/no to	<i>n</i>	86	53
		mean	69.5	69.5
		Rate of Answer	61.9%	38.1%
		Rate of Question	43.0%	26.5%
Various responses	without yes/no	<i>n</i>	114	147
		mean	130.5	130.5
		Rate of Answer	43.7%	56.3%
		Rate of Question	57.0%	73.5%

Note. The Rate of Answer shows the number of Responses **with** yes/no or Various responses **without** yes/no as answers in percentage. The Rate of Question shows the number of Affirmative or Negative responses in percentage.

Because affirmative questions tend to be neutral in the interrogator's presupposition (i.e. not biased in presupposition), respondents can respond to them without being affected from any bias given. However, because negative questions are always biased either affirmatively or negatively, respondents have a high probability of being affected by the bias. Therefore, negative yes/no questions were answered by various responses without yes/no at a higher rate than affirmative yes/no questions.

Before the guests arrive at the studio, they prepare themselves in order to give as much information as possible that is beneficial for their own good within the limited time of the program. As a result, it can be speculated that the guests of Larry King Live often respond skipping the word "yes" or "no" and instead explain their answers in detail, in an effort to give more information in the limited amount of time available.

The purpose of the Larry King Live television program is not to have a conversation, but to ask and answer questions. The cast of the program have mixed desires about what they want to achieve by appearing on the program. They are strongly expected to provide the viewers with a lot of information by responding to the questions instead of having a

conversation with the host.

Since the respondents in the TV program such as *Larry King Live* are conscious of the audience and of *Larry King*, their utterances are not ordinary. We cannot find any natural flow of daily conversation as playing catch in the conversation. Because broadcasting shows are basically “unusual” environment as the conversation does not look natural.

Negative yes/no questions are never neutral in presupposition. Instead, they always have either a positive bias or a negative bias (Murata & Narita, 1996). Thus, since respondents are aware of the expected answer, they usually feel that instead of simply answering “yes” or “no,” it is more important to explain the proposition.

Many instances of responses to negative yes/no questions were found in which the respondent did not directly answer “yes” or “no.” In fact, the interrogatives which were responded with “yes” or “no” were rare. Therefore, it was found that the basic rules of negative questions such as whether the proposition is correct or incorrect do not always function. Also, it was found that the rules of negative questions as yes/no interrogatives are not always observed by native speakers in everyday conversations.

It was revealed that, as I mentioned Bald (1980), he found a tendency that “yes” responses occur far more frequently than “no” responses. One of the reasons is that an interview situation prompts the interviewee to agree rather than disagree with the interviewer (p. 190). If an interviewee response is not “yes,” he/she thinks that he/she wants to explain why the response is not “yes” without directly saying “yes” or “no.”

Thus, as a result, there are many cases where yes/no questions do not function grammatically as to be answered by yes/no. Instead, they function as to be answered by various responses without yes/no. In fact, in conversations, negative yes/no questions prompt more responses without “yes” or “no” than affirmative questions.

However, the results show that contrary to my expectations, among affirmative yes/no questions, the frequency of responses with yes/no was not as high as I had expected. The situations in the conversations help account for the high frequency of various responses without yes/no in both affirmative and negative yes/no questions. Since *Larry King Live* is a television program with a very large audience, and it is a talk show with a journalistic emphasis, it is considered that the guests strive to answer all of the questions directly, considering the program’s potential influence.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the function of a negative yes/no question was investigated from a new angle of communication. Harukawa (2012) illustrated that an irregular method of responding sometimes happens when an interrogator answers to negative yes/no questions. By analyzing these irregular responses from the viewpoint of communication, many English yes/no questions were found to have been answered with neither “yes” nor “no” to the given proposition, instead they answered the interrogator’s presupposition. Also, it was

revealed that irregular responses occurred when native speakers responded to negative yes/no questions which had a negative bias.

In this research, the forms of the responses to negative yes/no questions and affirmative yes/no questions in actual conversations were quantitatively examined. The outcome of the hypothesis was that negative yes/no questions are prone to be answered by various responses with yes/no at a higher rate than affirmative yes/no questions in conversation, even though yes/no questions are supposed to be answered by yes/no grammatically (Leech & Svartvik, 1998). The above hypothesis was quantitatively verified by a *chi-squared test*. How often the respondent responded without answering with “yes” or “no” was analyzed.

The results of analyses are that the respondents responded to the interrogator’s presuppositions as soon as the respondent understood the interrogator’s presuppositions. Since the respondents in the Larry King Live television program are conscious of the viewers and an influential host such as Larry King, the respondents (especially politicians and entertainers) tend to focus on what they want the viewers to know about them, how their responses may affect their image, and how honest they are perceived to be, based on their responses. Therefore, the respondents are keen to find the presuppositions in the questions. If the respondents respond knowingly according to the interrogator’s intention, they respond to the interrogator’s presupposition instead of responding to the proposition. For example, in the case where the presupposition is correct or affirmative, if the respondent’s response is not “yes,” he/she explains why the response is not “yes” without directly saying “yes” or “no.” It was revealed that, as mentioned in Bald (1980), “yes” responses occur far more frequently than “no” responses. One of the reasons is that an interview situation prompts the interviewee to agree rather than disagree with the interviewer (p. 190). If an interviewee’s response is not “yes,” he/she thinks that he/she wants to explain why the response is not “yes” without directly saying “yes” or “no.”

This paper revealed that English native speakers sometimes respond to negative yes/no questions with answers that are not always grammatically correct, according to the rules of prescriptive grammar. This paper also illustrated that negative yes/no questions are sometimes answered not by polar answers “yes” or “no”, but by sentences without directly saying “yes” or “no.”

Although it seems that this research has a close relation with speech-act of Austin (1962), also, politeness of Brown and Levinson (1987), it is necessary to investigate the concept of them more deeply from now on. It is hoped the better result of research is obtained about English communication using negative questions, refer to these studies.

References

- Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Brown, P. & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bald, D. (1980). Some functions of yes and no in conversation. In S. Greenbaum, G. Leech & J. Svartvik (Eds.), *Studies in English linguistics* (pp.178-191). New York: Longman Inc.
- Carston, R. (1998). *Pragmatics and the explicit-implicit distinction* (Doctoral dissertation, University College London).
- Clancy, T. M. (2002). Current copula and negative questions: When we use them... ways to teach them.... *Chiba University of Commerce Bulletin*, 40(3), 81-94.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts* (pp.41-58). New York: Academic Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Harukawa, N. (2012). Variations of responses to negative yes/no questions in English. *The Jasec bulletin* (The Japanese association for studies in English communication), 21, 55-68.
- Higashimori, I. & Yoshimura, A. (2003). *Kanrensei riron no shin tenkai: Ninchi to komyunikeishon* [Novel development of relevance theory: Cognition and communication]. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Horn, L. (1989). *A natural history of negation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Imai, K. & Nakajima, H. (1978). *Gendai no eibunpou* [Modern English grammar]. Vol. 5. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Kamio, A. & Takami, K. (1998). *Danwa to jyouhou kouzou* [Structure of discourse and information]. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Kamio, A. (1979). On the notion speaker's territory of information: A functional analysis of certain sentence-final forms in Japanese. In G. D. Bedell, E. Kobayashi & M. Muraki (Eds.), *Explorations in linguistics*. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Kato, S. (2004). *Nihongo goyouron no shikumi* [Structure of pragmatics in Japanese language]. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Kodani, S. (2002). *Eigo no danwa bunseki* [Discourse analysis in English]. Kyoto: Douhousha.
- Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1998). *Present age English grammar: Chapter of communications* (New ed.) Tokyo: Kinokuniya.
- Machida, K. (2010). Why are there methods various though a negative sentence is made from English? *The English Teachers' Magazine*, 9, 18-19.
- Murata, Y. & Narita, K. (1996). *Eigo no bunpou* [English grammar]. Tokyo: Taishukan.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Takahara, O. (2003). Hitei no hyougen [Negative expressions]. In I. Koike (Ed.), *Ouyou gengogaku jiten* [Dictionary of applied linguistics] (pp.281). Tokyo: Kenkyusha.

Terakado, S. & Satou, T. (2008). Difference of idea between Japanese, German and English to negative interrogative. *Claritas* (English language and literature association of Aichi University of Education), 21, 80-98.

Data:

Larry King Live Corpus (Borrowed from Professor K.Yagi at Kwansei Gakuin University)