

ASSESSMENT OF POLAR QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper carefully assesses negative and positive polar questions in the English language. Users of the English language all over the world use the language to elicit information, and so they ask questions when necessary. In this paper, it was established that a question is called "polar" because it deals with polarity. Polarity simply has to do with the opposition between positive and negative. A polar question is a type of question that elicits a two-way answer—positive or negative. A polar question contrasts with content questions, which contain an interrogative or question word like "what" or "when", in which some more detailed answers are given. Finally, in asking the polar question, one has to make use of the modal auxiliary or the non-modal auxiliary verbs inverted to come before the subject of the sentence. One of the recommendations made in this paper was that it is important for students to learn to include the modal verb after "yes" or "no," as answering with a simple "yes" or "no" will be taken by a native speaker to indicate that the speaker is either being rude or has no interest in the conversation, and the conversation will end abruptly, with both parties feeling mildly offended.

KEYWORDS: Polar question, Negative and Positive polar questions.

Introduction

According to Hamblin's theory, there is thus no difference between positive polar questions (PPQs), negative polar questions (NPQs), and alternative questions (composed of two polar alternatives) in terms of their meaning. Groenendijk & Stokhof (2004) – making use of type-shift – basically predict the same. There is evidence, however, that the three types of questions are not always interchangeable. Although the positive and negative polarities are the same, *is Luke, right?* and *is Luke not correct?* Although they are similar in the sense that both the yes and no answers are the (only) complete answers to both questions, they cannot always be used interchangeably without changing their meaning. Ladd (2001) argues that to account for this distinction, one has to assume a genuine syntactic-semantic ambiguity here, involving a difference in the scope of the negation.

Another type of context in which negative polar questions are not quite interchangeable with positive polar questions is those where knowledge that the negative proposition is true gets the speaker closer to her conversation goal. One example is that of a medical examination, as observed on hospital fliers: *Is your child apathetic? Is your child not eating properly? Has he not been sleeping for the last three days?* Similarly, one can test the ecological behaviour of fellow citizens by asking them to *Do you turn off appliances when they are not in use? Do you not dump waste? Do you not run the water while brushing your teeth?* Bolinger (2002) noted that "polar questions" and "alternative questions" cannot always be considered variants of each other.

Concept of Questions

A question is an utterance that typically functions as a request for information that is expected to be provided in the form of an answer. Questions can thus be understood as a kind of illocutionary act in the field of pragmatics or as special kinds of propositions in frameworks of formal semantics such as alternative semantics or inquisitive semantics. Questions are often conflated with interrogatives, which are the grammatical forms typically used to achieve them. According to Huddleston and Geoffrey (2002), at the level of semantics, a question is defined by its ability to establish a set of logically possible answers. At the level of pragmatics, a question is an illocutionary category of speech act that seeks to obtain information from the addressee. The principal use of questions is to elicit information from the person being addressed

by indicating the information that the speaker (or writer) desires (Searle 2003). A slight variant is the "display question," where the addressee is asked to produce information that is already known to the speaker. For example, a teacher or game show host might ask, "What is the capital of Australia?" to test the knowledge of a student or contestant.

A direct question is one that seeks instruction rather than facts. It differs from a typical ("information") question in that the characteristic response is a directive rather than a declarative statement (Huddleston and Geoffrey 2002). For example,

A: When should I open your gift?

B: Open it now.

Questions may also be used as the basis for a number of indirect speech acts. For example, the imperative sentence "Pass the salt." can be reformulated (somewhat more politely) as: "Would you pass the salt?" which has the form of an interrogative but the illocutionary force of a directive.

The main semantic classification of questions is according to the set of logically possible answers that they admit. An open question, such as "What is your name?", allows indefinitely many possible answers. A closed question admits a finite number of possible answers. Closed questions may be further subdivided into yes–no questions (such as "Are you hungry?") and alternative questions (such as "Do you want jam or marmalade?").

Concept of Polar Questions in English

A polar question, also known as a yes-no question, or an affirmative-negative question, is a question to which the expected answer is either affirmative (in English, "yes") or negative ("no"). In English, polar questions begin with an auxiliary verb or modal verb and are usually, but not always, answered using the same auxiliary/modal verb. According to William et al. (2008), a polar question or a general question is a question whose expected answer is one of two choices: one that affirms the question and one that denies it. Typically, in English, the choices are either "yes" or "no". They present an exclusive disjunction, a pair of alternatives of which only one is accepted (Joseph 2005). In asking the polar question, one makes use of the modal auxiliary or non-modal auxiliary verbs inverted to come before the subject of the

sentence. This question is so called because it deals with polarity. Polarity simply has to do with the opposition between positive and negative. A polar question is a type of question that elicits a two-way answer—positive or negative. It either gives the answer "yes" or "no"; hence the name, "yes/no question". So we have examples like: are those girls reading their books? A polar question contrasts with content questions, which contain an interrogative or question word like "what" or "when", in which some more detailed answers are given. So we have examples like:

- Are those girls reading their books?
- Is the programme ending today?
- Was the course difficult?
- Were they around this morning?
- Will you come with me?

Different languages may use different mechanisms to distinguish polar ("yes-no") questions from declarative statements (in addition to the question mark). English is one of a small number of languages which use word order. Another example is French:

	French	Translation
Declarative	<i>Vous avez tué un oiseau.</i>	You have killed a bird.
Polar question	<i>Avez-vous tué un oiseau?</i>	Have you killed a bird?

The first strategy for forming polar questions is the use of a question particle, which is added to a corresponding declarative sentence to indicate that it is a question. The second general strategy for signalling polar questions involves the use of distinct interrogative verbal morphology. Most commonly, the verbal morphology may involve an affix that specifically signals that the utterance is a question. The third type is languages that have both question particles and interrogative verb morphology, either as two separate constructions or occurring together in a single construction. A fourth, fairly uncommon way to signal that an utterance is a question is by using a different word order from that used in corresponding declarative sentences. This method is used in a number of European languages, like German, in which the inflected verb is placed at the beginning of the sentence.

Negative Polar Questions in English

Generally, a polar question has as an answer a pair of polar opposites, positive and negative. English polar negative questions may display several types of bias, linked with their secondary illocutionary force. The negative polar question is closest to a statement when it functions as a rhetorical question. According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002), English negative interrogative and declarative questions, however, are considered to be quite strongly biased. Most grammars claim that positive and negative polar questions are generally interchangeable. Nevertheless, there are many factors that may block or favour the positive or negative polarity of the question.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) distinguish between epistemic, deontic, and desiderative bias, which can further differ in the degree or strength of the bias. Apparently, the epistemic bias (i.e., "the speaker thinking, expecting, or knowing that one answer is the right one") is linked with the question force of the interrogative, while the deontic bias (i.e., "the speaker judging that one answer ought to be the right one") occurs when the interrogative acquires the force of a directive. The desiderative bias is "not greatly different from the deontic" (i.e., "the speaker wants one answer to be the right one") – it will therefore be subsumed under the deontic bias in the present paper. In English, the negative form of the interrogative sentence is itself conducive. Negative questions with inversion may perform the functions not only of biased questions but also of exclamations, statements, and directives.

Positive Polar Questions in English

A positive polar question (PPQ) is a polar question that does not contain negation. It has been claimed in much previous work that positive and negative polar questions have different felicity conditions (van Rooij and Safarova, 2003; Romero and Han, 2004; Reese, 2005, 2007; Reese and Asher, 2007; AnderBois, 2011). In other words, a PPQ is only felicitous in a context if there is no compelling contextual evidence against it in that context (Buring and Gunlogson, 2000).

In formulating this generalization, Buring and Gunlogson (2000) assume the following notion of compelling contextual evidence for or against p :

Compelling contextual evidence for or against p

- a. Contextual evidence is evidence that has just become mutually available to the participants in the current discourse context.
- b. Compelling contextual evidence for p is contextual evidence that, if considered in isolation, would allow the participants to assume that p is the case.
- c. Compelling contextual evidence against p is contextual evidence that, if considered in isolation, would allow the participants to assume that p is not the case.

The suggested felicity condition for PPQs is motivated by the following examples.

Scenario: A and B are talking long-distance on the phone

⇒ no contextual evidence concerning the weather at B's location

- a. B: What's the weather like out there? Is it raining?
- b. B: What's the weather like out there? Is it sunny?

Scenario: A enters B's windowless office wearing a dripping wet raincoat

⇒ compelling contextual evidence for rain and against sunshine

- a. B: What's the weather like out there? Is it raining?
- b. #B: What's the weather like out there? Is it sunny?

Another factor that seems to affect the felicity of PPQs, especially in the absence of contextual evidence, are the beliefs that the speaker has concerning the prejacent of the question.

Scenario: A and B are talking long-distance on the phone; A is traveling in Egypt, and B

knows that it hardly ever rains in Egypt.

⇒ no contextual evidence as to whether it rains, but negative speaker belief

- a. B: What's the weather like out there? Is it sunny?
- b. ??B: What's the weather like out there? Is it raining?

Conclusion

This paper has comprehensively discussed polar questions and discovered that these questions are called polar because they deal with polarity. Polarity simply has to do with the opposition between positive and negative. A polar question is a type of question that elicits a two-way answer—positive or negative. A polar question contrasts with content questions, which contain an interrogative or question word like "what" or "when", in which some more detailed answers are given. Finally, in asking the polar question, one makes use of the modal auxiliary or the non-modal auxiliary verbs inverted to come before the subject of the sentence.

Recommendations

1. It is important for students to learn to include the modal verb after "yes" or "no," as answering with a simple "yes" or "no" will be taken by a native speaker to indicate that the speaker is either being rude or has no interest in the conversation, and the conversation will end abruptly, with both parties feeling mildly offended.
2. Students should also take care to repeat the modal or auxiliary and not the verb. In other words, the answer to the question Do you like chocolate? is Yes, I do. not *Yes, I like.

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