

# Negative Yes/No- Questions with the Positive Epistemic Implicature

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This talk addresses the interpretive asymmetry between certain negative and affirmative *yes/no*-questions in West Slavic languages, illustrated by (1) vs. (2) in Czech:

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| (1) | Eva <b>ne</b> přijede <sup>P</sup> ?<br>Eve <b>NEG</b> .arrive.PRES.3SG<br>'Will Eve not arrive?' | (2) | Přijede <sup>P</sup> Eva?<br>arrive.PRES.3SG Eve?<br>'Will Eve arrive?' |
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(1) naturally implicates that the speaker believes or expects that  $p = \text{Eve will arrive}$ . Since the implicature concerns the speaker's epistemic state and the believed proposition in the implicature is positive, it is a type of *positive epistemic implicature* (see also Romero & Han 2003). In contrast, (2) triggers no such implicature, it is epistemically unbiased. This asymmetry raises two main questions:

- i. What property of the negative *yes/no*-question enforces the positive implicature, and distinguishes it from the affirmative *yes/no*-question?
- ii. Why are the polarity in the negative *yes/no*-question and in the implicature associated with it opposite?

I will presuppose Gricean pragmatic principles of conversation, general assumptions about the epistemic states of interlocutors, and some proposals in the theory of focus and question semantics. Briefly, the answers are as follows:

First, following Groenendijk&Stokhof (1984), question denotations induce a partition on the set resulting from the intersection of the propositions in the Common Ground (CG). Negation in simple *yes/no*-questions (1) induces an unbalanced partition, correlated with a type of meta-conversational strategy questioning the appropriateness of a given conversational turn (adding *not-p* to CG in (1)). It is triggered by the need to resolve some epistemic conflict between the speaker S (who believes that  $p$ ) and the addressee A (taken to believe that *not-p*), or to ensure Quality (see Grice 1975), when S needs further evidence for the belief that  $p$ . These assumptions will be derived from the existence of the epistemic operator VERUM in the representation of the negative *yes/no*-question (see also Höhle 1992, Romero&Han 2003).

Second, the polarity of the proposition under VERUM allows us to capture the following general strategies: S, who believes  $p$ , asks A for any possible doubts about  $p$ , provided s/he takes A to believe *not-p*, and vice versa (see also Romero&Han 2003, and references cited therein).

Most importantly, the above assumptions allow us to motivate a number of properties of negative *yes/no*-questions with the positive epistemic implicature (YN-PI), which differentiate them from epistemically-unbiased questions (YN-NI) and otherwise might seem puzzling. For example, only in YN-PI, but not in YN-NI, the inversion of the subject is unacceptable or highly odd (cp. #*Nepije Eva?* – 'Doesn't Eve drink?', #*Copak to nikomu neschází přátelství?* – 'Well, doesn't anybody need friendship anymore?'); only YN-PI, but not YN-NI, sanction special adversative particles like *copak* (cp. *Copak já ji nestačím?* – 'Am I not good enough for her?' vs. #*Copak já ji stačím?*).

Finally, I will compare YN-PI vs. YN-NI questions in Czech with corresponding constructions in languages in which the relevant contrast is correlated with inverted/preposed vs. non-inverted/non-preposed negation: cp. Bulgarian *Ne pie li Ivan kafe?* – ‘**Isn’t** Ivan drinking coffee?’ (YN-PI) vs. *Dali Ivan ne pie kafe?* - Is Ivan **not** drinking coffee?’ (YN-NI).