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## Short replies in Italian: *si/no* and other markers between polarity and agreement

### Abstract

On the background of the well-known distinction between polarity and agreement particles (Moravcsik, 1971; Pope, 1973), the Italian particles *si/no* have been described both as polarity markers (cf. Bernini, 1995) and agreement markers (cf. Bazzanella, 1995). While these two values are often combined in actual speech (*si* = positive polarity, agreement; *no* = negative polarity, disagreement), they conflict when speakers have to reply to negative utterances. For instance, in replying to a negative question (e.g. “Didn't you read this book?”), the particle *no* would either assign a negative polarity for the content under discussion (“I didn't”) or reject the negative polarity proposed by the question (“That's not true” = “I did”). Replies to negative utterances are therefore a crucial context to investigate for a deeper understanding of the use of particles in short replies.

The study investigates the use of Italian *si/no* and other possible replying options at work in short replies to negative questions and assertions, in data collected *ad hoc* with two dialogic tasks (Interviews, Map Tasks). The analysis compares positive and negative short replies to both assertions and questions. Results show that *si/no* are mainly used as polarity markers, but the use of *no* as a marker of disagreement arises when conversationally marked (dispreferred, according to Pomerantz, 1984) moves are at play: in replies rejecting the previous turn assumptions (vs. confirming replies) and in replies to assertions (vs. replies to questions). In the same contexts, the use of more explicit markers increases on both the (dis)agreement and the polarity axes respectively, through the use of further particles and frequent recourse to echo replies, especially in the form of verbal echoes. In providing a data-based description of the use of Italian particles, results offer support to the markedness hypotheses proposed for a typology of short-reply systems (Farkas and Bruce, 2010).

### Key Words

Discourse particles, Italian, Negation, Polar questions, Disagreement, Polarity

### 1. Introduction

Speakers have at their disposal several verbal and non-verbal means to react to other speakers' assertions and questions, in order to confirm or reject their semantic content (Enfield et al., 2010). Recurrent verbal response formats have been cross-linguistically described, including a class of specialized particles. From a typological perspective, different systems have been identified (Moravcsik, 1971; Pope, 1973), according to whether languages feature particles whose main

function consists in either assigning a positive or negative value to the propositional content under discussion ('polarity' particles, as the English *yes / no*) or in confirming or rejecting the content proposed by the interlocutor ('agreement' particles, as the Japanese *hai / iie*). "Polarity" vs. "agreement" particles can be identified by comparing their use in replies to positive and negative utterances. Indeed, while in replying to a positive question (*Did you read this book?*), a positive reply would confirm the content proposed by the interlocutor, and a negative reply would reject it, the matching of polarity and agreement changes in replies to negative utterances. In replying to a negative question (*Didn't you read this book?*), the speaker could either assign a positive value to the propositional content ("me reading this book"), thus rejecting the negative polarity proposed by the question ("That's not true, I did"), or he could assign a negative polarity to the propositional content, thus confirming the negative polarity proposed by the question ("That's true, I didn't"). Particles are recognized as carrying a polar value, when they are used to assign positive vs. negative polarity to a propositional content, irrespectively of the utterance they reply to. Agreement particles on the contrary are used to confirm or reject the propositional content proposed by the interlocutor, irrespectively of its polar value.

Such a dichotomy opens the door to the question whether such particles can be included within the category of "pragmatic particles" (Fraser, 1996), namely particles managing textual and interpersonal relations rather than contributing to the ideational meaning (in Halliday, 1994's terms) of the sentence.

Italian *sì / no* are generally considered to be polarity particles (Bernini, 1995), but they are also claimed to work as particles of agreement, and are therefore included among Italian pragmatic particles (Bazzanella, 1995). In particular, Bernini (1990, 1995) observes that, when it comes to replies to negative utterances, the distribution of *sì* and *no* is quite puzzling, and proposes examples as the following:

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| (1) - Non stai bene?                             | "Are you not feeling well?" |
| a. - <b>No / Sì</b>                              | (=I do not feel well)       |
| b. - <b>Noo / Ma no / Ma sì / Sììì, sto bene</b> | (=I feel well)              |

When such variation<sup>1</sup> is observed, *sì* and *no* can be considered either as markers of polarity or as markers of agreement. Variation in use as well as hesitations and misunderstandings are also reported in other languages (see par. 2.1). However, only a few corpus-based studies have been carried out so far on the issue, and to our knowledge none of them concerns Italian.

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<sup>1</sup> We borrowed the term from variationist perspectives, where it indicates the alternate use of different forms to encode the same meaning. In the domain of polarity/agreement particles, authors refer to this phenomenon as *ambiguity*, *indeterminacy* or *neutralization* in the value of the particle (Bernini, 1990; Kramer and Rawlins, 2011; Holmberg, 2013)

In order to have a clearer picture of how such particles behave in short replies in actual conversation and how they contribute to the overall meaning of the reply, on the basis of a corpus of actual dialogic interactions, the current study address the following research questions: when a conflict arises in short replies between the marking of polarity and of agreement,

- a) do Italian speakers use *si / no* according to a polarity-oriented model?
- b) do they use other discourse strategies to encode agreement or polarity?
- c) which relevant features possibly bias the use of particles toward the encoding of agreement vs. polarity?

As a whole, the study aims at contributing to the debate over polarity and agreement systems of particles , from an empirically-based perspective and, as a consequence, to the discussion on their nature of semantic or pragmatic particles.

The paper is structured as follows. Par. 2 gives the theoretical premises and a review of the available literature: the typological parameters proposed to describe systems of particles in short replies (2.1.) and the available information for Italian (2.2.); a description of the pragmatic intentions carried by the utterances the particles reply to (2.3.), particularly negative utterances, that will be crucial to investigate (par.2.4.). Par. 3. presents the methodology of data collection (3.1.) and coding (3.2.), and a clearer formulation of our hypothesis (3.3). The results are presented in par.4 for particles (4.1.) and the overall format of the reply (4.2.). A discussion of results and concluding remarks are provided in par.5.

## 2. Short replies systems and the sentences they reply to

### 2.1. *Short-reply systems: cross-linguistic perspectives*

Short replies to polar questions seem to be a universal feature of language (Moravcsik, 1971; Pope, 1973). They can consist in the partial repetition of the question, possibly resulting in elliptical or echo VPs, as in English (2) or Irish (3) (Bernini, 1990):

(2) - Did you see John?  
- I didn't

(3) - An bhfca tú Seán? "Have you seen Sean?"  
INTERR see.PST.2SG you Sean  
- Ní fhacas "I haven't"  
NEG see.PST.1SG

A response format including such structures seem to be preferred by speakers of some languages, as English (Raymond, 2003). Many languages also have particles<sup>2</sup> that can be used alone in short replies. Among them, two main systems have been identified, as exemplified in Figure 2. by English and Amharic.

	English		Amharic	
	Pos. reply ( <i>I did</i> )	Neg. reply ( <i>I didn't</i> )	Pos. reply ( <i>I did</i> )	Neg. reply ( <i>I didn't</i> )
<i>Pos. question</i> ( <i>Did you go?</i> )	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Awon</i>	<i>Yälläm</i>
<i>Neg. quest.</i> ( <i>Didn't you go?</i> )	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yälläm</i>	<i>Awon</i>

Figure 1. Use of particles in short replies in English and Amharic.

Such a difference has been widely studied through the dichotomy between “polarity” (as English *yes-no*) and “agreement” or “truth-based” (as Amharic *awon-yälläm*) particles<sup>3</sup>. In this view, particles can either assign a polarity value to the proposition at issue (polarity systems) or confirm/reject of the proposition put forward by the previous speaker’s (agreement systems or truth-value systems).

In a slightly different perspective, Farkas and Bruce (2010) claim that two features should be considered independently: the absolute polarity attributed to the proposition at issue (with POS and NEG values); the relative polarity confirming or reversing the polarity proposed by the speaker (with

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<sup>2</sup> The issue of the lexical nature of such words is not often explicitly addressed by scholars. Enfield et al. (2010) call them 'interjections'. Fraser (2009) includes them among pragmatic particles and this is often the case in studies more oriented toward a conversational approach (see Bazzanella, 1995 for Italian). Instead, polarity particles often share properties with propositional anaphors (cfr. Bernini, 1990, 1995; Krifka, 2013) or heads of elliptical clauses (Holmberg, 2013), thus they contribute to the semantic meaning of the sentence and, as a consequence, should not be included among pragmatic particles. This raises the question of whether particles used in short replies should be cross-linguistically considered under the same lexical category, with important consequences for their comparability (see Bernini (1990) and Krifka (2013) for a discussion which takes into account both synchronic and diachronic perspectives). In the current paper we will follow the most neutral option and refer to such words as 'particles'. We will come back to the point in the concluding remarks.

<sup>3</sup> The labels of 'agreement' and 'polarity' also appear in Halliday and Hasan (1976: 208): “*yes* and *no* as answers to yes-no questions do not mean ‘I agree’ or ‘I do not agree’, as they do as rejoinders to statements, but simply express polarity”. The label 'truth-based system' comes from Pope (1973). Some scholars (cf. Holmberg, 2013) observed that 'agreement' is an infelicitous term, as one cannot "agree" or "disagree" with a question. In fact, what is meant with agreement/disagreement is confirmation or rejection of the proposition conveyed by the question and eventually with the speaker's assumptions about it. We will adopt the same use.

SAME and REVERSE values)<sup>4</sup>. In this perspective, French *si* and German *doch* combine POS and REVERSE polarity:

- (4) -Tu n'as pas lu le journal? "Didn't you read the news?"  
-**Si** je l'ai lu "Yes, I read it"

Romanian *ba* encodes REVERSE polarity and can combine with *da* and *nu*, which mark in turn POS and NEG polarity:

- (5) - Ana a plecat? "Did Ana leave?"  
- **Ba nu**, n-a plecat "No, she didn't"
- (6) - Ana nu a plecat? "Didn't Ana leave?"  
- **Ba da**, a plecat "Yes, she did"

Systems can be asymmetrical in the repertoire of particles ("differences in shape" for Moravcsik, 1971). For instance, German and French have two forms for POS replies, *ja / doch* and *oui / si* (respectively encoding SAME and REVERSE polarity, according to Farkas and Bruce's proposal), but only one form (GER *nein*, FRE *non*) for NEG replies<sup>5</sup>.

Further asymmetries show up in the use of particles ("differences in distribution" for Moravcsik, 1971). For instance, French *si* alternates with *oui* as a reply to negative questions (Kameyana, 2013):

- (7) A: Tu n'es pas sortie avec quelqu'un hier? "Didn't you go out with someone yesterday?"  
B: **Oui / si**, je suis sortie avec Louis. "Yes, I went out with Louis."

According to Farkas and Bruce (2010), Romanian *ba* obligatorily co-occurs with *nu* in negative replies, but it can occur alone (without *da*) in positive replies.

A relevant point for our study is the observation that specific contexts exist where particles show variation in their use, that is, when observed through the polarity/agreement dichotomy, their use conforms sometimes to a polarity and sometimes to an agreement system. Such a variation is asymmetric as well, as it does not involve all particles and contexts, but occurs in replies to specific utterances (namely: negative utterances) and involves specific particles. For example, according to Holmberg (2013)'s data, in replies to negative questions *no* always assigns a negative polarity to the proposition at issue, irrespectively of the preceding utterance, thus working as a polarity particle; on

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<sup>4</sup> A four-terms system was in fact described by Pope (1973) as well, whose values were identified as 'positive agreement', 'negative agreement', 'positive disagreement', 'negative disagreement'.

<sup>5</sup> The availability of a specialised item for positive reverse polarity is frequent: cfr. Bernini (1990) for results among European languages.

the contrary, *yes* can be used both as a positive and a negative reply, and can thus be interpreted as a marker of polarity (ex. 8) or as a marker of agreement (ex. 9)<sup>6</sup>:

- (8) - Isn't Mary coming?  
- **Yes** (= "Mary is coming")
- (9) - Is Mary not coming?  
- **Yes** (= "Mary is not coming")

Kameyana (2013) observes that Japanese *hai* and *ie*, perhaps the best known and most cited particles based on an agreement system (Kitagawa, 1980), are in fact accepted by native speakers to some extent in both positive and negative replies to negative utterances:

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| (10)A: Anata-wa mattaku eigo-o hanas-e-nai no desu ka      | "Can't you speak English at all?" |
| B: <b>Hai</b> , hanas-e-masen. / <b>ie</b> , hanas-e masu. |                                   |
| Yes speak-can-not    No speak-can                          | "I can't / I can"                 |
|  |                                   |
| (11)A: Sukoshi onaka ga suki masen ka?                     | "Aren't you hungry?"              |
| B: <b>Hai</b> , suki-mashita. / <b>ie</b> , suitei-masenn. |                                   |
| Yes hungry-PAST    No hungry-PAST.not                      | "I am / I'm not"                  |

This means that both *hai* and *ie* could be described as polarity particles or as agreement particles. Kameyana comes to similar results for English *yes / no* and French *oui / non*: although they are generally interpreted as polarity particles, they are also partially accepted when used according to an agreement system.

In order to explain both variation and asymmetries, two main classes of principles have been proposed, respectively linked to the interpretation of the utterances the particles reply to (Holmberg, 2013; Krifka, 2013; Bernini, 1990; Kameyana, 2013) and to markedness phenomena in stimulus - reply pairs (Farkas and Bruce, 2010).

We will here briefly sketch the different positions, which will be further developed in par. 2.3. and 2.4.

Holmberg (2013) accounts for cross-linguistic (polarity vs. agreement systems of particle) and intralinguistic (same particle working as an agreement or as a polarity particle) variation in terms of scope phenomena. In his perspective, both polarity and agreement (in his terms: truth-based) particles work in fact as operators assigning polarity to a proposition, but the proposition they

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<sup>6</sup> Kramer and Rawlings (2011) refer to this phenomenon as *negative neutralization*: however, although in these cases *yes* seems to neutralize its positive value, the *yes / no* opposition is not neutralized, as *no* is still consistently used with a negative value.

operates on is different. As it will be further discussed in par.2.4, negation in negative utterances can operate on different levels (VP, sentential, IP); as a consequence, the proposition the particle in the reply operates on also changes. Ex. (12) e (13) respectively show cases of high and low negated utterances, and the consequences for the interpretation of *yes / no* in replies: they always assign polarity to the proposition, but operate on different propositions<sup>7</sup>.

(12) - Isn't John coming too?

a. - **Yes** (= He is coming (too): It is true that he is coming)

Polarity particles

b. - **No** (= He is not coming (either) (It is false that he is coming))

(13) - Does John sometimes not come?

a. - **Yes** (= He sometimes does not come: It is true that sometimes he does not come) Agreement particles

b. - **No** (= He always comes: It is false that sometimes he does not come)

Prosodic and morphosyntactic cues can disambiguate between different scopes of negation; otherwise, the reply too can be ambiguous:

(14) - Is John not coming?

- **Yes** (= ?)

A similar approach is followed by Bernini (1990) for Italian (cf. par. 2.2).

Holmberg also predicts that differences in the availability of low (at VP level) and high (sentential) negation among languages have consequences in the possible interpretation of particles: only in languages allowing a low negation particles can operate according to an agreement system.

On similar lines, Kameyana (2013) links the variation in interpretation of Japanese particles *hai / iie* (cfr. ex.10-11) to the different interpretation of the sentences they reply to. In his view, Japanese particles are in fact used as agreement particles, confirming or rejecting the interlocutor's turn; but speakers do not simply confirm or reject the positive/negative propositional form of the utterance they reply to, but rather the assumptions raised up to the discourse model by the interlocutor's utterance as well as by contextual cues, along the lines discussed in Reese (2007)'s perspective (see par. 2.4). In par. 2.3. and 2.4 we will see in more details how such cues interplay.

Markedness has been invoked as an explanatory category for asymmetries in systems since Pope (1973), who supposes that languages specifically encode positive disagreement with a specific word because positive disagreement is more marked from a semantic point of view. However, no further explanation of how such semantic markedness should be described or explained is provided.

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<sup>7</sup> Examples from Holmberg (2013); adverbs *too* and *sometimes* are used in the sentences to force a high and low reading of negation.



Farkas and Bruce (2010) also predict possible asymmetries in the system of particles based on markedness criteria. On the basis of the model of discourse structure proposed by Stalnacker (1978), they state that every proposition in discourse need to be confirmed by all participants before it becomes part of the common ground available for subsequent discourse. They consider rejection of other speakers propositions as marked with respect to confirmation, which is the default behavior expected in a conversation; and rejecting a proposition included in an assertion as more marked than rejecting a proposition included in a question, as in the first case the previous expresses a stronger belief toward the truth-value of the proposition at issue. Therefore, speakers should use more explicit forms for rejection than for confirmation, and for rejecting assertions than for rejecting questions.

These observations are coherent with well-established findings in Conversation Analysis, claiming that agreement moves are preferred over disagreement ones (Pomerantz, 1984), and that negative replies are dispreferred in many conversational settings (Jefferson, 2002; Kaufmann, 2002). In the CA perspective, dispreferred conversational moves are marked by a number of discourse phenomena; among others, through mitigation techniques (including avoidance of explicit markers of disagreement or negativity) or delay (as a consequence, a disagreement can be preceded by markers of partial agreement).

Note that, although similar markedness principles (e.g. markedness of disagreement over agreement) are referred to by CA and studies concerning systems of particles for short replies, partly opposite results are predicted. We could expect, respectively, underuse of disagreement particles, especially in replies to assertions, as a way of minimization and avoidance of interactional conflicts, or over-specification / overuse of particles for disagreement, and especially after assertions, in line with Gricean principles of explicitly marking whatever contrast there is with the default or expected behavior.

Patently, further data from actual use in different languages and communicative situations are needed as a test bed for the currently available hypothesis. Nonetheless, the research conducted so far has provided clear suggestions on the relevant parameters for the investigation of both cross- and intralinguistic variation: the strength of the speaker's assumption toward the truth of the proposition at issue; the polar orientation of the speaker's assumption, as they are conveyed by the discourse and reflected in sentence form at different levels - including the prosodic and syntactic coding of the utterance to which particles reply.

## 2.2. *Si /no in short replies in Italian*

*Si* and *no* are described by Bernini (1995) as propositional anaphors (*profrasi*, lit. 'pro-sentences') or rhematic anaphors. With this function, they can occur in both independent and subordinate clauses:

- (15)a. Gianni è tornato a casa, Anna **no**  
 Gianni is come home Anna no "John came back home, Anna didn't"  
 b. Gianni non è tornato a casa, Anna **sì**  
 Gianni not is come home Anna yes "John did not come back home, Anna did"

- (16) Gianni tornerà a casa? Penso di **sì** / **no**  
 Gianni will-come home? I-think of yes / no "Will John come back home? I think / don't think so"

They also work as emphatic markers of polarity in full verbal sentences, to reject or contrast a previous assertion, within the construction *sì / no che* or alone, in final or postverbal position<sup>8</sup>:

- (17) Gianni è arrivato in ritardo. Anna **no** che non è arrivata in ritardo  
 Gianni is arrived late. Anna no that not is arrived late "John arrived late. Anna did not arrive late"  
 (18) Gianni non è arrivato in ritardo. **Sì** che è arrivato in ritardo / È venuto **sì** in ritardo / È venuto in ritardo **sì**  
 Gianni not is arrived late. Yes that is arrived late Is arrived yes late Is arrived late yes  
 "John didn't arrive late. Yes, he did arrive late"

In all these cases, *sì* and *no* clearly express a polarity value.

*Si* and *no* also occur in replies to polar questions: in such contexts, they are far more frequent than elliptical echo structures (Rossano, 2010). However, when they occur as short replies to (interrogative, declarative, imperative) sentences, the functions of polarity and agreement markers are not easy to tease apart. Replies to positive sentences would not cause problems, as positive polarity matches with confirmation and negative polarity with rejection. Indeed, Bazzanella (1995) describes uses of *sì* and *no* as pragmatic markers conveying confirmation (*sì*) or rejection (*no*) of a previous content<sup>9</sup>, but no examples are provided in which such values conflict with polarity. In the conflicting case of replies to negative sentences, Bernini (1995:213) claims that variation in use of *sì / no* occurs for both positive and negative replies and for both assertions and questions. According to Bernini, echo structures are used (as *sto bene* in ex.1) in order to avoid ambiguity in interpretation. Note that other particles encoding agreement, but not polarity, such as *già* (Calaresu, 2015; Squartini, 2014), do not show such an ambiguity in interpretation and do not need echoes:

- (19) - Quindi hai letto il giornale? "Did you read the newspaper?"  
 - **Già** (=I did)  
 (20) - Quindi non hai letto il giornale? "Didn't you read the newspaper?"

<sup>8</sup> The postauxiliary position is also available, with a concessive value: *Gianni è sì arrivato in ritardo, ma non è stato un problema* ("Gianni arrived late, that's true, but it was not a problem")

<sup>9</sup> Further uses as pragmatic particles are mentioned in both Bernini (1995) and Bazzanella (1995).

- Già

(=I didn't)

The use of the compound form *si no* is also mentioned by Bernini (1995) with the value of agreement, irrespectively of the polarity of the reply<sup>10</sup> :

(21)- Per Capodanno vieni da me, no? “You come by me on New Year’s Eve, don’t you?”  
- **Si no**, quello certo “Yes no, that’s sure” (= I’ll come)

(22)- Questi pantaloni non costano molto “These trousers are not expensive”  
- **Si no** “Yes no” (= they are not)

Based on a detailed description of examples, in which the linguistic form (interrogative, declarative, imperative) and speakers’ assumptions and wishes are taken into account, Bernini (1995) proposes the table in Figure 2 (particles are ordered according to their frequency). It predicts that *si/ no* mainly work according to a polarity-oriented model (*si* for positive replies, *no* for negative replies), but variation occurs in all contexts in replies to negative utterances, except in positive replies to an imperative.

Reply	Preceding sentence		
	Interrogative	Declarative	Imperative
Negative agreement	<i>no; si</i>	<i>no; si</i>	<i>no; si</i>
Positive disagreement	<i>si(i); noo</i>	<i>si(i); noo</i>	<i>no!</i>

Figure 2. Use of *si/ no* in Italian in replies to negative sentences (Bernini, 1995:218)

Bernini accounts for such variability in terms of change in the scope of the particle: that is to say, particles in such contexts would encode high-level instead of low-level polarity (*Si* = “It is true that (non p)”; *No* = “It is not true that (non p)”). Agreement-oriented behavior of *si/ no* (*si* for agreement, *no* for disagreement) is thus treated along the same lines of Holmberg (2013). Bernini (1990) comes to a partly different conclusion, stating that positive disagreement is the context where both variation in coding and ambiguity in interpretation mostly occurs, because of the pragmatic markedness of such context.

Beyond Bernini’s and Bazzanella’s reference descriptions, very little attention has been paid so far to the use of the particles *si/ no* in Italian short replies in such conflicting contexts; furthermore, to our knowledge, no corpus-based specific survey has been carried out.

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<sup>10</sup> In our own native speaker competence, in both examples *si no* could also mark disagreement; prosody would have a major role in disentangling the two values. For *si no* see also Moretti (1992).

Our research aims at describing the use of *si* / *no* in short replies on the basis of a corpus of conversational data, in order to provide data-based support to the above described hypothesis about their function in discourse. Moreover, on the basis of quantitative tendencies and regularities, it aims at correlating the use of *si* / *no* with the relevant parameters proposed in the literature, in order to evaluate the explanations proposed for their variability (change in scope interpretation; difference in pragmatic markedness).

### 2.3. *Polar and biased questions, checks, and assertions*

An interrogative sentence, or ‘question’, is generally defined as a sentence with specific marking devices indicating that its purpose is to gain information (Sadock and Zwicky, 1985: 178); more specifically, ‘polar’ questions (as opposed to ‘content’ or wh-questions) ask the addressee for the truth-value of a given propositional content; “the expected answer is the equivalent of *yes* or *no*” (Dryer, 2013, cap. 116). It is well known, however, that “there is not a clear correspondence between questions, as a syntactic form, and asking questions, as an activity” (Koshik, 2005:1). On the one hand, speakers do not always use interrogative-shaped utterances to seek information; on the other hand, utterances with an interrogative form may perform different functions other than questioning. We will briefly refer to both sides of the problem, in order to better refine our object of analysis.

Interrogative sentences can accomplish various kinds of indirect speech acts, such as requests, invitations, offers, complaints, accusations (cfr. Heritage, 2002; Koshik, 2005; Enfield, Stivers, Levinson, 2010). Within information-oriented questions, more subtle distinctions have been drawn between *neutral* and *biased* (Moravcsik, 1971; Reese, 2007), or *conducive* (Bolinger, 1957), questions. The latter, unlike the former, allow the expression of the speaker’s epistemic stance toward the truth-value of the proposition at issue. A biased question is used by the speaker “to express his or her belief that a particular answer is likely to be correct and to request assurance that this belief is true” (Sadock and Zwicky, 1985: 180)<sup>11</sup>. Thus, biased questions are not “information seeking” but rather “confirmation seeking” (Bublitz, 1981; Stivers and Enfield, 2010). Similarly, Carletta et al. (1996) distinguish neutral polar questions and *checks*, biased questions that

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<sup>11</sup> Namely, “expressing his own belief” and “asking for confirmation” are different speech acts that could as well be separately performed. For instance, through rhetorical questions (Koshik, 2005; Heritage, 2002; Stivers and Enfield, 2010), the speaker also expresses his beliefs, eventually questioning a prior utterance, but he does not ask for a confirmation; rather, he tries to gain an explicit consensus from the addressee. Following Bolinger (1957), Koshik (2005) includes rhetorical questions among biased questions, since both types of utterance “question” the truth-value of a proposition currently available in the discourse model. The same position is held by Reese (2007), who labels as biased all questions allowing the display of the speaker’s belief. The current analysis is centered on check questions, or confirmation-seeking questions, that is a (sub-)type of biased questions that “seek for a confirmation”, therefore excluding rhetorical questions. Stivers and Enfield (2010) also distinguish requests for confirmation from rhetorical questions.

“request(s) the partner to confirm information that the checker has some reason to believe, but is not entirely sure about”.

Biased questions are signaled with different marking devices. Question tags following declarative sentences act as pragmatic markers of confirmation-seeking questions (Fraser, 1996; Malamud and Stephenson, 2014; Farkas and Roelofsen, 2012) or, in a different perspective, produce complex speech-acts composed of assertions and questions (Asher and Reese, 2007). While the question in ex. (23a.) is not biased, question (23b.) is positively biased, that is conveys the speaker's belief or feeling that the proposition at issue ('raining now') should be the case (but see par. 2.4. for further precisions on this point); (23c.), instead, is negatively biased:

- (23)a. ENG: Is it raining?
- b. ENG: It is raining, isn't it?           positive bias
- c. ENG: It is not raining, is it?       negative bias

The speaker's degree of confidence in his own assumption can also be signaled, for instance through prosody. Based on Carletta's model, Grice and Savino (2004) draw a distinction between *tentative* (lower confidence) and *confident* (higher confidence) checks. In the following examples, lower confidence is marked through rising final prosodic contour (24a.), higher confidence through final falling contour (24b):

- (24)a. ENG: It is raining, isn't it? positive bias, low confidence: tentative check
- b. ENG: It is raining, isn't it. positive bias, high confidence: confident check

In Figure 3, polar orientation of bias and confidence of the speaker's assumptions interact through two different marking devices: the positive/negative question tags and the rising/falling prosodic contour.

Bias		Confidence
POS	<i>It is raining, isn't it.</i>	HIGH
	<i>It is raining, isn't it?</i>	LOW
neutral	<i>Is it raining?</i>	-
NEG	<i>It is not raining, is it?</i>	LOW
	<i>It is not raining, is it.</i>	HIGH

Figure 3 : Interplay between positive/negative bias and degree of confidence of speaker's assumptions in English biased questions.

Declarative questions, in which the syntax of a declarative is combined with the prosodic contour typical of polar interrogatives (Stivers and Enfield, 2010), have also been described as biased

questions (Gunlogson, 2002; Krifka, 2016). In this case, the declarative form signals the speaker's bias toward a certain reply and the interrogative prosody indicates the request for a confirmation:

(25) There is a vegetarian restaurant around here?

Note, however, that marking devices are not necessary for the addressee to understand that a declarative sentence requires a confirmation. In the following excerpt, the Interviewer makes an assertion concerning a "B-event", a propositional content whose truth only the addressee has rights to confirm or reject (Heritage, 2002); in his reply, the interviewee provides a confirmation:

(26) Interviewer: So in a very brief word David Owen you in no way you regret what you did despite what has happened in Brighton this week in the Labour Party.  
Interviewee: n- In no way do I regret it.  
(Heritage and Roth, 1995:11, cited in Koshik, 2005:1)

On these premises, unified accounts have been proposed to describe how assertions and (neutral and biased) questions work in the on-going discourse. Farkas and Bruce (2010) and Krifka (2012) suggest that both assertions and polar questions put forward propositional contents whose truth-value both speakers must mutually agree on, for it becomes part of the common ground. The addressee's agreement can be signaled either through rather minimal marking (phatic particles, nodding) or even implicitly in assertions, as a truth-value has already been (provisionally) put forward by the speaker and agreement is the unmarked option for the addressee. After questions, on the other hand, "only those continuations are admissible in which the addressee makes an assertion that answers the question" (Krifka, 2016).

Within the framework of Conversation Analysis, the fact that some utterances expect a specific reply is accounted for in terms of the so-called 'preferred' response (Pomerantz, 1984) in the adjacency pair initiated by such an utterance. Preference in this sense does not deal with psychological preferences of neither the speaker nor the addressee, but rather with the default, least marked, option, which both speaker and addressee know to be available for such a communicative exchange. As a general rule, a reply to a question is required (Schegloff, 1968), and answers, that is replies providing the required information, are preferred over non-answers such as "I don't know" (Stivers and Robinson, 2006). With regard to assertions and biased questions, an 'agreement' reply is preferred, that is a reply that confirms the beliefs the first speaker displays in his turn (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987; Koshik, 2005; Enfield et al., 2010).

#### 2.4. *Negative sentences and conduciveness*

Under different theoretical frameworks, from pragmatics to formal semantics, a vast literature has dealt with the interpretation of negative sentences as opposed to positive ones. Horn (1989) refers to an abundant psycholinguistic literature concerning the cognitive markedness of negative sentences, both in acquisition and in processing. The marked status of negative sentences is also observed at the discourse level. Concerning the discourse functions of negative sentences, Horn quotes Strawson's remark (1952: 18) that "the standard and primary use of "not" is specifically to contradict or correct" and Wason's observation that in natural language negative statements often "correct a false preconception rather than simply being true relative to a state of affairs" (1972: 32). These observations point to the fact that negative sentences in discourse are more frequently used to reject propositions available in the interlocutors' common ground, either explicitly uttered or implicitly evoked, rather than to introduce negative propositions *ex novo*. This is also true for negative questions: they are often used to challenge the interlocutor's beliefs in rhetorical questions (Heritage, 2002; Koshik, 2005; Reese, 2007; cfr. note **Errore. Il segnalibro non è definito.**) or to ask the interlocutor to confirm or reject a proposition raised in the previous context. This means that negative questions are often considered to be biased questions (Bolinger, 1957; Sadock and Zwicky, 1984; Reese, 2007).

On the basis of such common ground, relevant points of debate for the current study concern the nature of the association between negative form and bias and the polar orientation of the bias of negative questions.

The association of negative questions with bias or conduciveness is generally described in terms of the speaker's expectation or even the speaker's desire for a specific (namely: positive) reply by the addressee (cfr. ex. 1b.). However, many scholars (Ladd, 1981; see also Horn, 1989; Romero and Han, 2004; Reese, 2007; Krifka, 2016) pointed to the fact that an English sentence such as:

(27) Isn't there a vegetarian restaurant around here?

could suggest either a negative or a positive bias:

- a. the speaker is seeking confirmation for his belief that there is not a vegetarian restaurant in the surroundings (negative bias)
- b. the speaker is seeking confirmation for his belief that there is a vegetarian restaurant in the surroundings (positive bias)

A similar phenomenon has been observed in other languages; the two readings are licensed under different conditions, concerning among others prosody (Asher and Reese, 2007) and the kind of negative markers involved (Büring and Gunlogson, 2000; Romero and Han, 2004). On the basis of the lack of ambiguity of sentences (28a) and (28b):

- (28)a. Aren't there some vegetarian restaurants around here?  
b. Aren't there any vegetarian restaurants around here?

(external negation = positive bias)  
(internal negation = negative bias)

Scholars accounted for such a difference in terms of scope-phenomena. According to Krifka (2012), the ambiguity of (28) is a consequence of two different possible scopes of the negation, internal (ex. a.) or external (ex. b.) to the proposition (see also Romero and Han, 2004; Holmberg, 2013). The internal reading leads to a negatively biased question: the speaker asks the addressee whether he agrees about the validity of the negative proposition ('a restaurant not being around'); the external reading leads to a positively biased question: the negation has scope over the VERUM operator of the utterance (Höhle, 1992), and the speaker asks the addressee whether he would exclude the validity of the positive proposition ('a restaurant being around').

Reese (2007) proposes a different interpretation for the negative vs. positive bias of negative sentences. On the basis of examples such as (29) (Reese, 2007:89), he first discusses the notion of "speaker's assumption":

- (29) [A is sitting in a windowless office. B enters wearing a wet raincoat.]  
a. A: Is it raining?  
b. A: #Isn't it raining?

In ex (29) where contextual cues should push A to assume that it is raining, a negative question like (29b) is not felicitous; a question asking the addressee to confirm a positive belief that it is raining can only have a positive form (29a). Ex. (29) shows that speaker's (positive) assumption is not an adequate characterization of the bias of negative questions. Rather, Reese (2007) proposes that two parameters have to be taken into account: the speaker's assumptions about the truth-value of the proposition at issue; and the contextual evidence currently available in favor or against its truth. All negative questions, according to Reese, convey a positive assumption by the speaker toward the proposition at issue, but the nature of such assumption differs in negatively and positively biased questions. The speaker's positive assumption is part of the asserted component in the so-called positively biased negative questions, which are indeed composed speech-acts: they assert a positive content and ask the addressee whether he would reject it. Instead, negatively biased questions carry the additional meaning that some contextual evidence clashes with the (previous) speaker's positive assumption. For example, a negative question would be felicitous in context (30):

- (30) [A is sitting in a windowless office. B enters wearing sunglasses.]  
a. A: #Is it raining?  
b. A: Isn't it raining?



In this case, A would check whether his assumption that it is raining is true despite contextual evidence against it (the sunglasses)<sup>12</sup>.

Contextual negative evidence can as well come from the preceding discourse. An example taken from our corpus will further illustrate this point. In ex. (31), speaker i02 is driving speaker INT around a map where several figures are drawn ('colibri' and 'colle delle rondini' refer to some of these figures):

- (31)1. i02: devi fare metà giro intorno al colibri -, e poi proseguire dritto.  
2. INT: verso: <il colle> [//] il colle delle rondini.  
3. i02: n:o. n:  
4. INT: **non hai il colle delle rondini?**  
5. i02: eh: n: on ci sono colli delle rondini sulla mappa.  
6. INT: **non hai una figura subito dopo il colibri?**  
[i02: you must turn half way around 'colibri' and then go straight on. INT: toward 'colle delle rondini'. i02: no INT: don't you have 'colle delle rondini'? i02: there's no 'colle delle rondini' on the map. INT: don't you have a figure right after 'colibri'?]

INT mentions the figure "colle delle rondini" (turn 1.), but i02 suggests that the figure is not on her own map (turn 2.); INT therefore asks for a confirmation of the non-existence of the figure by means of two subsequent negative questions (turns 4. and 6.). When she first mentions the figure (turn 2.), INT has no reasons to think that the figure is not in i02's map: in fact, as it is on her own map, she has reasons to think that it is part of the common ground. Her subsequent use of the negative form in turns 4. and 6. is due to i02's turns 3. and 5., which bring to focus the possible non-existence of the figure. With the negative form, INT is signaling a change in her own assumption from a previous positive to a later possibly negative one, made relevant by the preceding context. Question in turns 4. and 6. are biased, not in the sense that INT is expecting a specific reply, but in that she signals that the possible falsity of the propositional content has become relevant in the discourse model.

A similar analysis can be drawn for negative assertions. Let's consider one further example from our corpus:

- (32)1. INT: ma # sono ravvicinate -, queste curve? sono strette?  
2. i03: &mmh n:o -, non sono strette. sono due curve piuttosto larghe.  
3. INT: okay. okay -, quindi <non> [/] <non devo farle> [//] **insomma non sono zigzag.**  
[INT: are they tight, these curves? are they narrow? i03: no, they're not narrow. They're rather wide. INT: okay. Then I do not [/] they're not zigzag then.]

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<sup>12</sup> A similar proposal is made by Bublitz (1981), who states that negative questions could simply be considered as the counterpart of positive ones, in which speakers ask "whether the non-existence of a fact is true or not" (Bublitz, 1981:867). Such a complex question can occur when the non-existence of a fact has become in some way salient in the common ground; in this case it can be the object of a specific question.

INT asks for the shape of the curves she has to draw on the map (turn 1.). After i03's reply (turn 2.), INT asks for further confirmation by means of a negative assertion (turn 3.). The "not-zig-zag shape" mentioned here is a paraphrase of i03's previous assertion ("they are rather wide curves", turn 2.). The falling prosodic contour signals that, because of the previous turn, INT is now quite sure of the negative truth-value of the proposition and only needs a final confirmation. Once again, the negative sentence in 3. is biased in that it signals that the speaker got from the previous discourse reasons to think that the asserted negative proposition is the case. The strong expectation of a confirmation does not arise from the negative form, but from the falling prosodic profile, which signals the speaker's high confidence.

In the end, a positive assumption concerning the proposition at issue results as the pragmatic effect of Gricean principles (see also Krifka, 2016): in using a negative form, that is the marked form for a propositional content, the speaker suggests that the "non-validity" of the proposition has become salient in the current discourse; his asking for some confirmation triggers a further inference concerning a possible clash with his previous (therefore: positive) belief. Such negative sentences are biased, in that they let the addressee infer that: 1. the speaker has got contextual reasons to think that a certain state-of-affairs is not the case; 2. the speaker needs the addressee to confirm or reject this assumption. The degree of confidence in the speaker's assumptions is instead conveyed by other features; in particular, the prosodic profile of the sentence plays a crucial role in licensing a 'tentative' or 'confident' interpretation of the speaker's assumptions.

We cannot give here an extensive review of several further fine-grained analyses of how the speaker's assumptions and attitudes are conveyed in negative questions and assertions<sup>13</sup>. It is important to conclude that, from the way questions and assertions are uttered and the context in which they occur, the addressee gathers hints on the speakers' stance concerning the truth-value of the propositions at issue. Different assumptions by the speaker could give rise to different perlocutive effects on the addressee: indeed, giving information as a reply to a neutral question is a different speech act from confirming or rejecting a previous assumption in replies to tentative or confident checks. In order to perform these different speech acts, the addressee could employ different strategies and select different marking devices, and particles among them.

### **3. Research design**

#### *3.1. Data elicitation*

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<sup>13</sup> Further studies on the way negative questions and assertions are embedded in actual interaction contexts are provided by the special issue of *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002), devoted to "Negation and Disagreement".

The study is based on data elicited through two dialogic tasks, involving one researcher and one experimental subject:

- an Interview in which the researcher asks the subjects questions about their knowledge of foreign languages, experiences in studying abroad, habits and attitudes toward foreign languages and local dialects;
- a Map Task (Anderson et al., 1991), a cooperative task involving two participants. One participant, called 'Giver' (in our case, the experimental subject), has a map with a route marked on it; the other, called 'Follower' (in our case, the researcher), has a map without the route; their common goal is to help the Follower to draw the route on his map.

9 female Italian native speakers, aged between 19 and 31 ( $M = 22.6$ ), university students in Northern Italy participated in the tasks. Participants were not aware of the purpose of the study; they were told that it aimed at comparing native and nonnative speakers' ability to speak Italian, and that additional information concerning their linguistic competence needed to be collected. The researcher was about the same age as the subjects and was instructed to use as many negative questions and assertions as possible: given the aims of the tasks, this could be obtained in a rather natural way.

The data were audio-recorded and later on transcribed and segmented into turn units according to the CHILDES protocol (MacWhinney, 1995).

The dataset consists of the replies given by the subjects to the researcher's negative assertions and questions (from now on: stimuli).

The data elicitation design allow us to control for a number of variables<sup>14</sup>: the sample is homogenous in terms of speakers' sex, age, education level, regional variety of Italian spoken<sup>15</sup>; all participants in the task, including the researcher, are about the same age and belong to the same social group; furthermore, they did not know each other before the task.

Given the tasks involved, the stimulus-reply pairs also share relevant pragmatic properties. The researcher and the subjects share a similar common ground based on their experience as students enrolling in Foreign Languages and Linguistics studies; however, while trying to set the specific linguistic profile of the subjects in the Interview, the researcher can have false assumptions that need to be corrected. In the Map Task, both participants have a map, but only the Giver knows the route;

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<sup>14</sup> This would have been extremely difficult with non-elicited corpus data. A first survey of two of the reference corpora available for spoken Italian (the Italian part of C-Oral Rom, cf. Cresti and Moneglia, 2005; CLIPS, cf. Albano Leoni, 2006) did not offer a large amount of occurrences (respectively around 80 and 150 occurrences); moreover, the contexts considerably differ along a number of sociolinguistic and pragmatic variables. For the sake of comparison with data coming from reference corpora, in a previous study (Author and Author, submitted) we compared our MapTask corpus with the 45 Map Task dialogues - 90 participants of different sex, age, education and regional variety of Italian - contained in CLIPS: the results proved to be consistent with our MapTask data, suggesting that our corpus, although quantitatively limited, is sufficiently representative at least when these kinds of communicative exchanges are considered.

<sup>15</sup> The researcher taking part in the tasks is female, aged 28; she was born in the South of Italy but has lived in different parts of Northern and Central Italy for several years.

moreover, the two maps are not identical: this causes false assumptions in the shared common ground and the frequent need for checks, as displayed in example 31 and 32 (par. 2.4). To sum up, in both tasks stimuli are confirmation-seeking speech-acts and concern “B-events”, information held by the subjects and that the researcher needs to know in order to accomplish the task. On the other hand, our corpus does not include other kinds of exchanges, such as rhetorical questions, opinion-seeking questions and assertions ('assessments' in Stiver and Enfield's coding), or quarrels between speakers concerning the same states-of-affairs: negative questions and assertions in such contexts could elicit different kinds of replies and different sets of particles.

The distribution of the stimulus-reply pairs in the corpus is provided in Figure 4:

	<b>Interview</b>	<b>Map Task</b>	<b>Total</b>
Stimulus-reply pairs	242	331	573

*Figure 4. Dataset composition.*

### 3.2. *Data coding*

Data are coded with regards to four parameters. The first two are independent variables and concern the assumptions over the propositional content at issue in the stimulus-reply pairs:

1. The form of the stimulus (coding values: declarative, 'nd' tag; interrogative, 'ni' tag).

This parameter was selected as a cue to the strength of the assumptions conveyed in the stimulus. Following Reese's suggestions, we describe our stimuli as negatively biased: with the negative form, the speaker signals that some contextual evidence suggests the possible non-validity of the propositional content at issue and asks for a confirmation<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, we assume that the

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<sup>16</sup> Italian admits both positively and negatively biased negative questions (cfr. par. 2.4.), but in our data stimuli are mainly negatively biased, as they arise as confirmation checks against negative contextual evidence. Occasional occurrences of positively biased questions also arose, as in:

INT: ma io non devo andare verso l'albergo? (lit.: but don't I have to go toward 'albergo'?, meaning: you told me that I had to go to the hotel; why are you now telling me this instead?).

In the Interviews, some negative questions arise as a partly conventionalized strategy for topic change (see Bernini, 1995 for similar cases). In the following example, after a discussion over the use of local dialects, the interviewer asks about other dialects by means of a negative question, conveying a very weak negative bias, due to the fact that such dialects have never been mentioned up until now:

INT: e dialetti di altre parti d'Italia non ne senti qui? ("what about dialects from other parts of Italy, don't you hear them here?")

In this case, a positive reply would not act as a proper rejection of a negatively biased stimuli, as discussed in par.4. These cases have been excluded from the analysis.

form of the utterance conveys a difference in the speakers' confidence towards the negative bias: a declarative conveys a higher degree of confidence, and an interrogative conveys a lower one, possibly resulting from a change with respect to a previously positive assumption (cfr. above ex. 31 and 32). In Italian, the declarative / interrogative opposition is mainly marked through prosody (Maiden and Robustelli, 2007)<sup>17</sup>, and different prosodic contours distinguish different kinds of questions: tentative checks have a rising prosodic contour, similar to neutral questions; confident checks have a gradually descending prosodic profile, also typical of an assertion (Interlandi, 2004; Savino, 2005)<sup>18</sup>. Utterances were therefore coded on the basis of a perceptual prosodic analysis: a gradually descending prosodic contour was coded as 'declarative', conveying a higher confidence degree (confident assumption); a rising prosodic contour was coded as 'interrogative', conveying a lower confidence degree (tentative assumption)<sup>19</sup>.

2. The polarity assigned in the reply to the propositional content at issue, as it is inferable from subsequent speech and context (coding values: positive, 'pos'; negative, 'neg'; ambiguous or not-polarized replies, such as *non so* ('I don't know'), '\'; replies without explicit reference to the proposition at issue, 'ot'). Remember that in our data when the value is positive the speaker is rejecting the stimulus' negative assumption over the propositional content at issue; when the value is negative, the speaker is confirming this assumption. The possible pragmatic values of the reply are given by the interplay of the two parameters, as depicted in Figure 5.

Polarity assigned in the reply to the proposition at issue	Form of the stimulus	
	<i>Interrogative negative</i>	<i>Declarative negative</i>
<i>Negative</i>	confirm a tentative assumption	confirm a confident assumption
<i>Positive</i>	reject a tentative assumption	reject a confident assumption

Figure 5. Pragmatic values of replies.

The last two parameters are dependent variables and concern the format of the reply. We considered:

3. The particle eventually occurring at the beginning of the reply (coding values: 's' for *sì*; 'n' for *no*; 'ot' for other particles; '\' for absence of any particles<sup>20</sup>);

<sup>17</sup> The interrogative prosodic contour most widely described has a final rising contour, and "a combination of the nuclear pitch accent and boundary tone play a role in distinguishing questions from statements" (Grice and Savino, 2003. See also Canepari, 1980; Avesani, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Interlandi's data are particularly significant for this study, as they refer to North-Western Italian speakers - North-Western Italy being the area where our corpus has been collected. However, similar observations are drawn by Savino (2005) for different regional varieties.

<sup>19</sup> The reliability of the prosodic coding given by the two authors was checked against the coding of a sample of the data by five external coders, experts in prosody. inter-coder agreement reaches 95% of the sample.

<sup>20</sup> A more fine-grained analysis of the prosodic/phonetic realization of the particles *sì/no* (reduplications; lengthening and emphasis; prosody) was taken into account but not included in the current analysis.

4. The occurrence of further linguistic material. We will refer to replies including linguistic material different from particles as to ‘expanded replies’.

Expanded replies can add further details or explanations:

(33)INT comunque non hai fatto corsi di: francese lì.

i01: no. **però vorrei farlo quest'estate.**

[INT: anyway you did not take French courses there. i01: no. but I would rather take one this summer]

or they can more explicitly deal with the polarity intended for the proposition at issue. In this latter case, the expanded reply can incorporate part of the stimulus’ linguistic material, as in the following recurring constructions:

a. exact repetition of the predicate, with the same polarity intended for the proposition at issue:

(34)INT: ma quindi con lei: quand'eri piccola: non parlavi italiano.

i08: no! **parlavo italiano!**

[INT: so when you were young you did not speak Italian with her. i08: no! I spoke Italian!]

b. partial repetition of the predicate, without the verb, with the polarity intended for the proposition at issue:

(35)INT: ma mh: non devo fare un giro intero.

i01: no -, **non un giro intero.**

[INT: but mh I do not have to do a complete rotation. i01: no -, not a complete rotation]

c. repetition of a constituent as a thematic element, followed by *si/no* carrying the intended polarity value:

(36)INT: tu non hai neanche l'albergo?

i07: sì! **l'albergo sì!**

[INT: you did not have ‘albergo’ either? i07: (lit.) yes! ‘albergo’ yes!]

Given the role played by echo replies in many languages (cf. par 2.1.), we will devote particular attention to these constructions. (Coding values: ‘v-echo’ for type a.; ‘n-echo’ for type b.; ‘TOP-part’ for type c.; ‘ot’ for other kind of linguistic material; ‘\’ for replies only composed by a particle).

Figure 6 shows the coding of ex. (34): after INT’s declarative sentence (nd), i08’s reply assigns a positive truth-value to the proposition at issue (‘speaking Italian as a baby’) by using the particle *no* (n) followed by a verbal echo construction (*parlavo italiano*, V-echo).

Text	Form of Stimulus	Polarity value of Reply	Particle	Further linguistic material
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INT: ma quindi con lei: quand'eri piccola: non parlavi italiano. i08: no! parlavo italiano!	nd	pos	n	V-echo
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Figure 6. An example of data coding.

### 3.3. Hypothesis and research questions

Our aim (cfr. research questions, par.1) is to describe how the interplay between the two independent variables, as depicted in Figure 5, affects the form of the reply in terms of (a) choice between particles *si* and *no*; (b) use of other verbal strategies, especially in the form of echo-replies. In particular, as for (a), we want to know whether *si* / *no* behave as polarity particles (as proposed by Bernini, 1995) or instances of use as agreement particles (as proposed by Bazzanella, 1995) are also attested. In case a variable behavior is observed, that is *si* and *no* work in some cases according to a polarity and in some others according to an agreement system, we want to know (c) whether the variation correlates with markedness features, according to Farkas and Bruce (2010)'s proposals over asymmetries in the particles repertoires.

In order to disentangle marked contexts, we will move from the following hypothesis coming from perspectives on preferential moves (Pomerantz, 1984):

- positive replies, as rejecting the proposition proposed by the previous speaker, are dispreferred and therefore marked when compared with negative replies;
- replies rejecting declarative sentences are marked with respect to replies rejecting interrogative sentences, because of the different strength of the previous speakers assumptions conveyed by questions and assertions.

On the one hand we will check whether markedness hypothesis are confirmed in our data, namely whether positive replies are marked differently from negative replies by speakers. Instances of markedness will be the use of more explicit formats for encoding polarity and (dis)agreement, as the use of further particles or a higher frequency of expanded replies. On the other hand, we will check whether variation in use of *si* / *no* correlates with markedness features, and more specifically whether instances of uses of *si* / *no* as markers of agreement arises (only / mostly) in marked replies.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Si* / *no* and other particles in initial position

We first describe the use of particles at the turn beginning in positive and negative replies. Results in Figure 7 clearly show that speakers tend to use *si* for positive replies and *no* for negative replies. This confirms that *si/no* mainly encode polarity, as proposed by Bernini (1995).

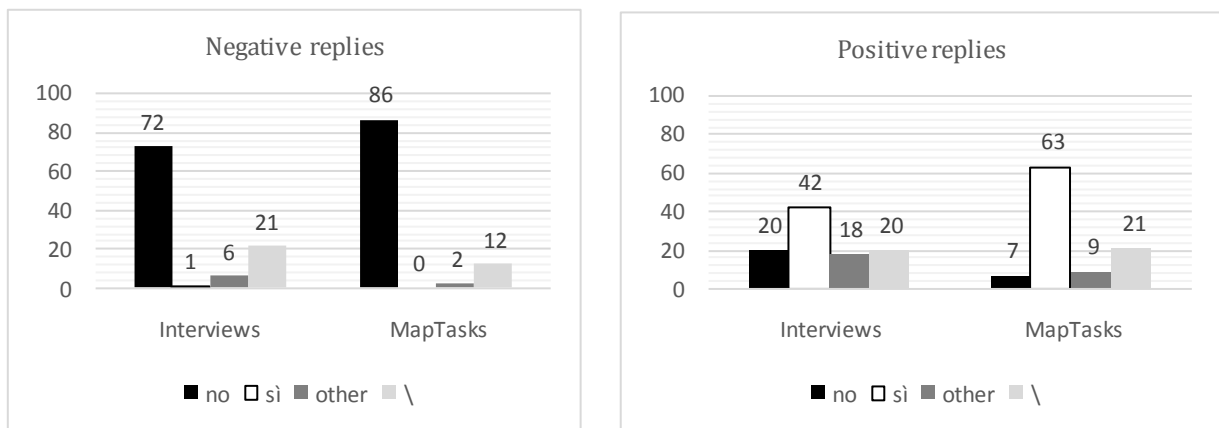


Figure 7. Percentage distribution of particles for negative and positive replies.

Nevertheless, the picture is not specular for positive and negative replies. *No* is almost the only option for negative - that is confirming - replies (72-86% *no*, 1-0% *si*), showing that *si* is not used as a marker of agreement. Instead, some variation occurs for positive, rejecting, replies where both *si* and *no* are found (42-63% *si*, 20-7% *no*). This suggests that in such contexts *no* can work as a marker of disagreement; instances of *no* as a marker of disagreement are higher in Interviews than in Map Tasks.

The alternation between use of *si* / *no* for positive replies even occurs in the same speaker:

(37)INT: ma non devo fare un giro.

i06: **si**. fai un piccolo giro

[INT: but I don't have to make a turn. i06: **yes**. you make a small turn.]

(38)INT: e quelle comunque non erano in francese.

i06: **no**. erano in francese -,

[INT: and these however were not in French. i06: no. they were in French -,]

In both examples, speaker i06 is assigning a positive value to the proposition at issue ('drawing a circle', 'the lessons being in French'), but she uses *si* in the former example and *no* in the latter.

If we compare ex. 38 with ex. 39:

(39)INT: quindi non vado verso la fine del foglio -,

i06: **n:o**. vai: leggermente giù +...

[INT: therefore I do not go toward the end of the sheet -, i06: no. you go slightly down]

we see that the contribution of *no* is ambiguous between assigning negative polarity to the proposition at issue ('going toward the end of the sheet', ex. 39) and rejecting the previous negative sentence ('the lessons were not in French', ex. 38): the subsequent linguistic material in the reply is



crucial in its disambiguation. A similar ambiguity does not occur for *sì*, which is almost only used to assign positive polarity.

Combinations of *sì* and *no* are not frequent (4 occ.). Some are due to self-corrections or hesitations about the intended reply. In one case a combination of rejection (*no*) and positive polarity (*sì*) is observed:

(40)i08: anche perché io non abito qui a Pavia -, quindi <sono veramen>  
 INT: <ah non hai> non hai preso la casa <qui>  
 i08: <no sì!>  
 &mh nel senso. sono di Varese. ho la casa qua. cinque giorni alla settimana. però, il weekend torno a casa!  
 [i08: 'cause I don't live here in Pavia, so <I'm really> INT: <oh you didn't> you didn't find a place <here>  
 i08: <no yes!> I mean. I'm from Varese. I have a place here. five days a week. but in the weekend I go back home!]

Within positive replies, where alternation between use of *sì* and *no* occur, we further compare their use in replies to declarative and interrogative sentences. As shown in Figure 8 (showing results for positive replies only), *no* as a marker of disagreement is more frequent in replying to declaratives than in replying to interrogatives, at least within the Interviews subcorpus. Thus, the different strength of the assumption conveyed by the stimulus (stronger in declaratives, weaker in interrogatives) also plays a role in the preference for a particle, at least when this specific task is concerned.

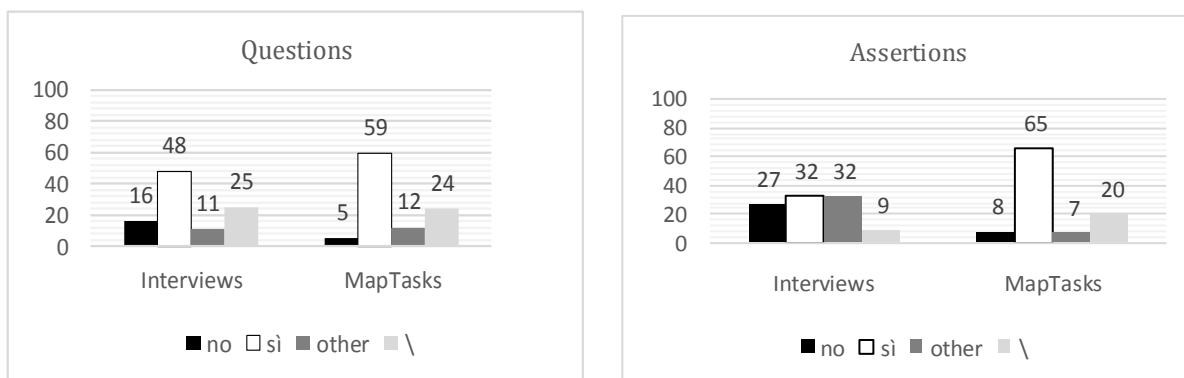


Figure 8. Percentage distribution of particles for questions and assertions (only positive replies).

As Figure 7 shows, particles besides *sì* and *no* occur in a minority of cases. They are at least twice more frequent in Interviews than in Map Tasks, and three to four times more frequent in positive than in negative replies (18-9% of positive replies vs. 6-2% of negative replies). Moreover, within positive replies, they are more frequently used in replies to declarative than in replies to interrogative sentences, at least in Interviews (32% vs. 11%, Figure 8). Thus, as a whole, use of other particles increases in the same contexts in which use of *no* as a marker of disagreement increases.

Particles occur both alone or together with *si / no*. Particles occurring alone include *mah* (lit. 'but', 13 occ.), *esatto*, *esattamente* ('exactly', 8 occ.), and occasionally *okay*, *ecco* ('here you are'). *Mah* only occurs in Interviews and encodes hesitation and partial rejection:

(41)INT: e quando parlavano loro: tu n:on capivi:: bene?  
i04: **mah!** mh: dipende -, di solito ho più problemi  
[INT: and when they spoke you did not understand well? i04: *mah*, it depends -, usually I have more problems than that]

*Esatto*, *esattamente* mainly occur in Map Tasks. Despite their semantics suggesting a plain confirmation, they are used in both negative (42) and positive (43) replies, thus for both confirming and rejecting:

(42)INT: invece non vado <verso> [/] verso l'alto.  
i04: **esatto**.  
INT: okay -, okay -, quindi riscendo in giù.  
[INT: I do not go up, instead. i04: exactly. INT: okay, I go down then]

(43)INT: ma aspetta -, allora. io non passo tra l'albergo e la discoteca.  
i02: **esatto!** passi tra l'albergo e la discoteca -, appunto.  
[INT: but wait then. I do not go between 'albergo' and 'discoteca'? i02: exactly! you go between 'albergo' and 'discoteca', indeed]

Particles occurring in combination with *si / no* include *be'* ('well', 12 occ.), *infatti* ('indeed', 4 occ.), *invece* ('instead', 2 occ.). *Be'* mitigates positive - rejecting - replies, in combination with either *no* (44) or *si* (45)<sup>21</sup>:

(44)INT: non faccio curve:  
i08: **be' no**. fai una curva:  
[INT: I do not make a turn. i08: well no. you make a turn]

(45)INT: quindi la linea non è dritta.  
i07: **be' sì** -, abbastanza dritta.  
[INT: therefore the line is straight. i08: well yes, quite straight]

*Infatti*, postponed to *no*, expresses confirmation<sup>22</sup>:

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<sup>21</sup> *Be'* is a contracted form of *bene* ('well') which functions as a pragmatic particle/discourse marker, see Bardel and Pauletto (2012).

<sup>22</sup> *Infatti* can also confirm positive assumptions, as in the case of the following example, not included in the analysis as the stimulus is positively biased:

INT: ma io non devo andare verso l'albergo? i05: sì! ecco -, infatti  
[INT: (lit.) but don't I have to go toward 'albergo'? (meaning: you told me that I had to go to the hotel; why are you now telling me something different?) i05: yes! that's it -, indeed.]

(46)i08: ascoltavamo delle canzoni -, imparavamo i colori -, sì insomma -,  
INT: ma non era tanto utile.  
i08: **n:o! infatti!**  
[i08: [about her English lessons] we listened to songs, learned name of colors, however -, INT: it was not so useful. i08: no! indeed!]

*Invece*, following or preceding *sì*, signals a change in the polarity proposed by the previous speaker, thus a rejection<sup>23</sup>:

(47)INT: però non giro intorno all'albergo.  
i04: **invece sì. #** dovresti girare intorno.  
[INT: but I don't turn around the 'albergo'. i04: instead yes. you should turn around.]

As a whole, particles different from *sì* / *no* play a quantitatively subsidiary role in the contexts analyzed. They mainly work on the (dis)agreement axis or in mitigation (Caffi, 2007) and are more frequent in positive, rejecting replies vs. negative, confirming replies and in rejecting assertions vs. rejecting questions. These tendencies draw a coherent picture in that the form of replies changes according to preference formats: dispreferred moves are marked through a more explicit management of disagreement.

The higher frequency of other particles in Interviews, with respect to Map Tasks, may instead be due to the more fuzzy nature of information exchanged in Interviews, often in need of further precisions and *distinguo* (cfr. ex. 41), when compared with instructions exchanged in the Map Tasks which can be actually treated as dichotomic (cfr. exx. 42-47).

In the end, particles such as *be'*, *mah*, *invece*, *infatti* observed in our corpus crucially differ from *sì* / *no*, as these latter confirmed the fact that they mainly operate as markers of polarity. When conversationally marked contexts (rejecting replies) arise, other particles often occur to encode disagreement or to mitigate rejection. Only in a number of cases, in such contexts, *no* loses its role of marker of negative polarity to directly encode rejection, thus shifting from a more content-oriented to a more interpersonal-oriented function.

#### 4.2. Further linguistic material: echo structures

Figure 9 compares the percentage of expanded replies within positive and negative replies. Given the alternation in use of *sì* / *no* observed for positive replies, it is not surprising that speakers tend to

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<sup>23</sup> *Invece no* would as well be possible to reject a positive content, but given the negative bias of our stimuli it is not found in our data.

expand their replies more often in this case: almost all positive replies (98-88%) are expanded; negative replies too are often expanded, but in a lower percentage (74-61%).

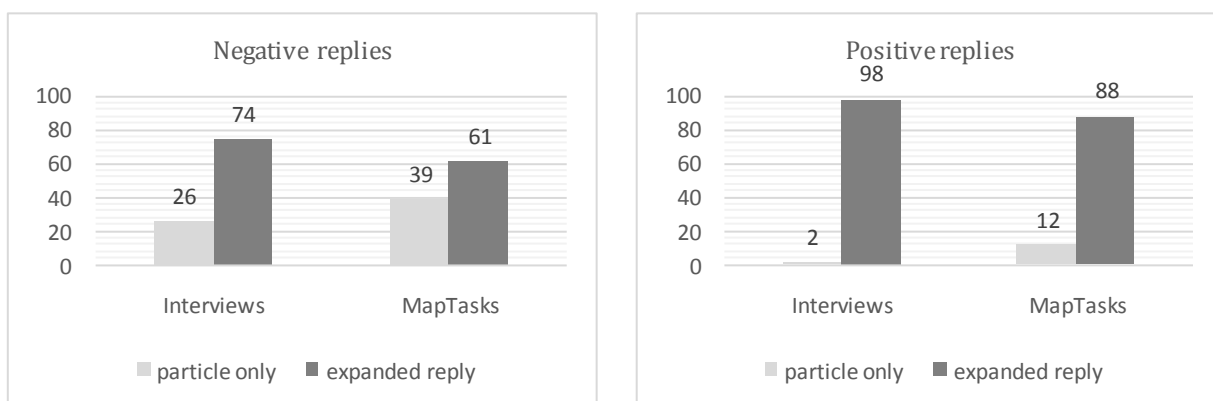


Figure 9. Percentage distribution of expanded replies in negative and positive replies

More interestingly, if we concentrate on the proportion of echo-replies, that is replies including the repetition of a part of the preceding turn (Figure 10), we see that they are twice more frequent within positive replies (51-64% of positive vs. 30-32% of negative replies). Verbal echoes in particular (V-echo), that is echoes including the repetition of the verb, reach 39-49% of expanded replies.

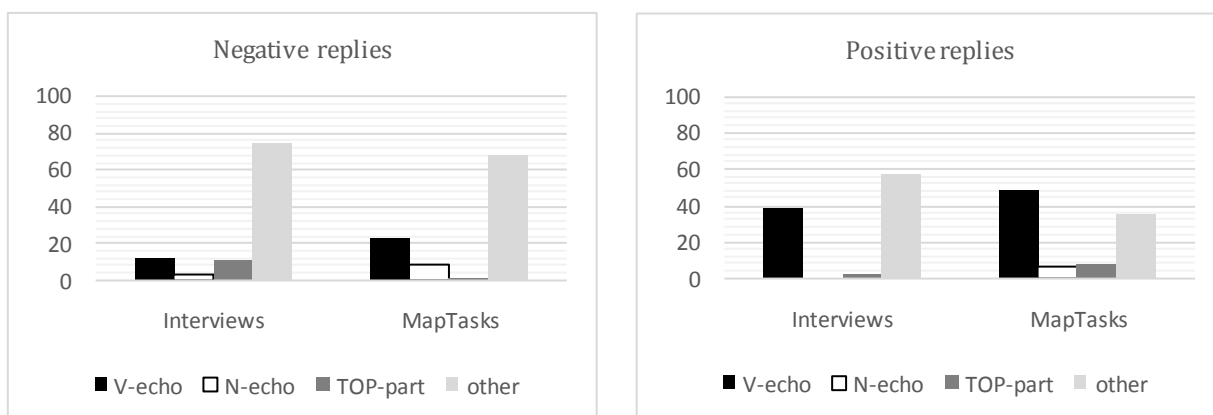


Figure 10. Percentage distribution of echo replies

Echoes often include the exact repetition of the whole VP (see ex. 34 and 37-38), and more rarely occur in a reduced form, including the verb and the pronominal realization of the object NP:

(48)INT: non ce l'hai l'ambulante?  
 i04: sì -, **ce l'ho**.  
 [INT: you don't have 'ambulante'? i04: yes -, I have it]

(49)INT: ma # non devo toccare la scritta.  
 i04: sì. **la tocco**.  
 [INT: but I don't have to touch the writing. i04: yes -, I touch it]

Less frequently, short replies include an NP/PP as the topic of the reply followed by *si/no* carrying the intended polarity value ('TOP-part' in Figure 10):

(50)INT: e quindi alle medie inglese non l'hai fatto.

i08: **alle medie sì**.

[INT: and so you did not study English at junior high. i08: at junior high yes]

(51)INT: cioè non hai niente lì. # in: basso.

i04: **in basso a sinistra no**.

[INT: you mean you do not have anything there. downwards. i04: downwards left no]

This can result in a combined use of particles *si/no* in the same reply; in ex. (52), *si* is used twice marking positive polarity; in ex. (53), *no* at the turn beginning encodes disagreement, and *si* after the repeated PP *con loro* encodes positive polarity:

(52)INT: invece poi spagnolo non lo conosci

i06: **sì - , spagnolo: sì -**, l'ho fatto: va &be' per: <d> [/] # tre anni alle superiori

[INT: you do not know Spanish instead. i04: yes -, Spanish yes, I studied it for three years at college]

(53)INT: con loro non parli: altre lingue

i09: &mh n **no - , con loro sì -**, capita anche che parlo: altre lingue però: vabbe' # così per gioco

[INT: you do not speak other languages with them. i09: no -, with them yes, I sometimes speak other languages, but just for fun]

As a whole, we can observe two main differences in the format of positive and negative replies. The first difference concerns the proportion of expanded replies: positive replies, which reject previous negative assumptions, are more frequently expanded, a result which once again confirms well-established findings about markedness of dispreferred replies. The second difference concerns the form of the expansion: positive replies include echo constructions, and especially verbal echoes. Thus, verbal echoes, and not only particles, seem to play a relevant role in Italian short replies, at least when reversing replies are considered. Apart from the use of particles, short replies to polar questions and assertions in Italian, and especially reversing replies, make use of a range of formulaic formats including the partial repetition of the previous turn, either echo-VP or NP/PP followed by *si/no* as markers of polarity. Although Italian do not dispose of auxiliaries as English or Irish (cfr. ex. 2, 3), a range of elliptic replies is available and used as well.

## 5. Discussion and concluding remarks

Our findings support Bernini (1995)'s description of Italian *si* / *no* in short replies as primarily conveying polarity: in replying to negative sentences, as it is the case for replies to positive sentences, *no* mainly assigns negative polarity whereas *si* assigns positive polarity to the proposition at issue. They also partly confirm the variation observed by Bernini with respect to replies to negative questions (cf. Figure 2); however, when compared with the schema proposed by Bernini, our data suggest that variation is rather restricted to the area of positive disagreement (Figure 11): indeed, in positive replies to negative sentences, together with a majority of *si* a percentage of *no* is observed. This means that, when speakers want to reverse the negative polarity proposed by the previous sentence (what means rejecting a previous negative assumption), they occasionally deviate from the use of *no* as a polarity particle and use it in order to reverse such an assumption. A similar deviation is quite unusual for *si* (only one occurrence) in the area of negative agreement: when they want to confirm the negative polarity of the previous sentence, speakers only very rarely use *si* as a marker of agreement.

Reply	Preceding sentence	
	Interrogative	Declarative
Negative agreement	<i>no</i>	<i>no</i>
Positive disagreement	<i>si, no</i>	<i>si, no</i>

Figure 11. Distribution of *si* / *no* in our dataset (cf. Figure 2).

As a consequence, they can not be considered as proper markers of (dis)agreement, as it is the case for other pragmatic particles mentioned by Bazzanella (1995), *già* among others. Indeed, although *si* can be used in replies expressing agreement, when such a value co-occurs with the expression of negative polarity use of *si* is largely dispreferred. Conversely, *no* is used to some extent in positive replies, in order to reject the previous assumptions, but in this case complex response formats are displayed, in which *no* is accompanied by further particles and echo-replies: the encoding of positive disagreement is therefore never restricted to the particle. Other particles, such as *mah*, *be'*, *infatti*, *invece* also occur in short replies and mainly convey the speaker's (dis)agreement or mitigate the disagreement toward the previous speakers' sentence. Hence, when such particles are combined with *si* / *no*, the functions of agreement and polarity are distributed over the two (*si* / *no* for polarity; other particles for (dis)agreement); this is not systematic, however, as the use of *no* as a marker of disagreement is observed even when it co-occurs with other particles.

The format of replies does not only include particles: expanded replies are frequent, and quasi-systematic within reversing replies. They include a considerable amount of echo constructions, explicitly encoding the polarity assigned to the proposition at issue. Echoes especially occur in the form of VP; *si* / *no* can also occur as the rhematic part of echo replies, following a repeated NP / PP as a topic, and in this case they always mark polarity. Thus, elliptical sentences observed in

typological descriptions for languages such as English, Irish or Portuguese can also be systematically used, when encouraged by the context, in a language such as Italian, which lacks of a proper set of auxiliaries to this end.

When considered together, our data show that reversing replies differ from confirming replies under many respects: the possible shift of *no* from the polarity toward the (dis)agreement axis; the more frequent use of particles working on the (dis)agreement axis; the more frequent use of echo replies, explicitly conveying the polarity value assigned to the proposition at issue. As a whole, when speakers have to reverse the polarity of the previous sentence, they use a variety of means aiming at both more explicitly rejecting the previous assumption (through particles) and more clearly stating the intended polarity for the proposition at issue (through echo replies). Confirmative replies are more implicit under both respects.

The major explicitness of reversing replies can be interpreted as a consequence of the potential ambiguity of *si/no* in replies to negative sentences (as also suggested by Bernini, 1995), as well as an instance of a more general phenomenon, namely the well-known markedness phenomena observed for dispreferred replies since Pomerantz, 1984 and Sacks, 1987. Support to this last interpretation is given by Rossen-Knill et al. (1997)'s study over the format of replies to different types of positive questions (among them, checks and neutral yes-no questions) in English Map Task data. The authors found that reversing (negative) replies resort to expanded replies much more frequently than confirming replies; this mostly occurs in replies to check questions, which are questions carrying a positive assumption concerning the truth-value of the proposition at issue. The study confirms that the differential marking of reversing replies is linked to the need of putting off the table the assumptions evoked by the interlocutor's previous turn; the fact that, in their corpus, the possible ambiguity of the particle is not an issue (in replies to positive questions, agreement and polarity do no conflict) further suggests that the main function of more explicit strategies used in reversing replies is not disambiguation of the intended polarity but rather the managing of marked conversational moves.

A more careful look at reversing replies in our data has further shown that the use of explicit strategies increases when replies follow declarative sentences as opposed to interrogative ones. This means that the stronger the interlocutor's assumptions concerning the proposition at issue are, the more likely the speaker is to resort to explicit marking of both the rejection and the statement of the intended polarity.

When it comes to the use of particles, and more precisely to systems of particles encoding polarity or agreement, our results provide corpus-based evidence to the predictions drawn by Farkas and Bruce (2010). Farkas and Bruce predict that asymmetries in the particles' repertoires, due to the previously depicted markedness criteria, result in more specific coding devices for reversing than for

confirming replies, and for reversing assertions than for reversing questions, as shown by French, German, Rumanian among others (cfr. par. 2.1). Our data show that Italian exhibits the same markedness principia in the use of particles, rather than in repertoire. Although the lack of particles specialized in expressing (positive) disagreement, when Italian speakers need to produce a reply rejecting the previous assumptions, and especially after an assertion, they:

- frequently resort to other explicit strategies, such as discourse particles conveying (dis)agreement and echo replies, clearly stating the intended polarity;
- occasionally use *no*, generally conveying negative polarity, to encode rejection; hence the *si* / *no* alternation in positive replies.

The differences observed between the two tasks call for a relevant role of the discourse situation and the kind of conversational moves involved. For deeper understanding of the phenomenon, further studies will be needed to investigate a wider range of discourse contexts, in which different conversational roles and moves are compared and taken into account as relevant parameters. For the time being, we can draw the following conclusions: when speakers exchange more personal information (as is the case in the Interviews) - rather than quite objective information (as in Map Tasks) - managing agreement is conversationally more relevant: therefore, all markedness phenomena observed increase in frequency.

In the end, our findings support the idea that Italian speakers tend to perceive negative assertions and questions as confirmation-seeking rather than information-seeking acts. Negative assertions or questions put emphasis on the speaker's assumptions of the negative truth-value of the proposition at issue, and such assumptions have to be taken into account in the reply. Italian has a system of polarity particles (*si*, *no*) and speakers coherently employ both particles for replying to positive sentences. When replying to negative sentences, they do not only have to assign a polarity value to the proposition at issue, but also have to confirm or reject the negative assumptions conveyed by their interlocutors, and to state alternative assumptions. To this end, they exploit different means, together with *si* / *no* or alone: particles devoted to the managing of (dis)agreement, and echoes explicitly encoding the intended polarity, to express rejection or confirmation. Moreover, *no* can be used as a marker of disagreement, even when positive polarity is assigned to the propositional content at issue. In this case, a shift occurs, often observed as the source of the pragmatic functions of discourse particles (Diewald, 2011; Günther and Mutz, 2004; Hansen Mosegaard, 2008), from an ideational meaning (encoding of polarity) to an interpersonal meaning (encoding of disagreement). Such a shift exploits a change in the scope of the particle, as suggested by many authors (Bernini, 1990; Holmberg, 2013): the negative value of *no* moves from assigning of a negative polarity to the proposition (low negation) at issue to assigning a negative truth-value to the previous speakers' assumptions (high negation). However, while differences in scope describe how such a shift can



occur (that is, why a particle encoding polarity can be used to encode agreement), they do not explain why and when it actually occurs. Indeed, differences in bias in the sentence stimuli - generally suggested to explain variation between polarity-oriented and agreement-oriented uses of the same particle - cannot be invoked in this case, as all stimuli considered in our dataset are negatively biased. Rather, variation is explained by markedness phenomena: the high-scope use arises when dispreferred moves are at play, pushing the speaker to use more explicit means to manage the conversation on the interpersonal level. This is even more strongly confirmed when not only the particle, but the whole sentence format is considered.

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