Responding to Negative Utterances: An Ellipsis Account

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I. Introduction

In our everyday use of English, responses with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ constitute quite a large number of dialogues. Polarity-bearing particles ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in such responses have received much scrutiny because of their syntactically and semantically peculiar behaviors, but they still wait for a much effective and tenable account.

In this paper, we concentrate on the ways of responding to negative utterances, as follows:

(1) Q: Did she not pass the exam?
   A: a. Yes, she didn’t.
      b. No, she didn’t.
      c. Yes, she did.
      d. No, she did.

(2) A: She didn’t pass the exam.
   B: a. Yes, she didn’t.
      b. No, she didn’t.
      c. Yes, she did.
      d. No, she did.
The instances in (1) illustrate a negative polarity question–answer pattern, whereas those in (2) illustrate a negative assertion–response pattern. The most peculiar aspect of these patterns is that ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is used interchangeably to make a positive or negative reply (cf. Cho 2008).

The structure of this paper is as follows. We first review the recent works on the issue at hand: the interchangeability of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in responses to negative utterances. We then move to propose an account for the ways of responding to negative utterances. The idea we develop in this paper is that both syntactic feature checking/valuation and semantic binding/composition work together in determining the polarity of the clause immediately following the polarity particle ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Furthermore, it is to shown that ellipsis plays an instrumental role in deriving bare polarity particles with the immediately following TP being elided (cf. Kang 2007; Park 2005).

II. Previous Works


Kramer and Rawlins (K&R, 2009) advocates a close syntactic relation via feature checking between the negative polarity particle ‘no’ and the (post–comma) clause immediately following it, where ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are part of the structure of the entire sentence.

(3) Q: Did she not pass the exam?
   A: a. \[[\text{PolP} \ \text{No}\{\text{uNEG}\} \ \text{TP she did not}\{\text{NEG}\} \ \text{pass the exam}\}\].
   b. \[[\text{PolP} \ \text{Yes} \ \text{TP she did not}\{\text{NEG}\} \ \text{pass the exam}\]\].

To achieve such a direct relation between them, K&R assume that ‘no’ as in (3Aa) is generated with an uninterpretable feature [uNEG] that undergoes feature–checking with the TP–internal negation bearing