A typological study of answers to polar questions

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Polar questions are interrogative structures which generally require either a positive or a negative answer to their propositional content, i.e. confirmation or disconfirmation, respectively. While polar questions have been extensively discussed (cf. e.g. BERNINI & RAMAT 1996; KÖNIG & SIEMUND 2007; DRYER 2013), the cross-linguistic variation of the form and application of their answers has received much less attention.

It is known that besides particles, such as English yes and no, answers can have the form of full or partial (negated) sentences, (negated) verbs as shown in example (1), or (dis-)confirming suffixes, among others (cf. HOLMBERG 2016: 61-64). Different forms for confirming and non-confirming answers are also possible. As can be seen in the Finnish example (1), the confirming liin is clearly the verb repeated from the question, while the disconfirming en is a special negative verb.

Especially with regard to negative polar questions, languages differ in the answer strategy used to confirm or disconfirm the propositional content. HOLMBERG (2016) distinguishes two systems for particle answers to negative polar questions. In the polarity-based system, the negative polarity of a negative polar question is confirmed by the negative particle, as is the case for English no. In the truth-based system, the negative polarity of a negative polar question is confirmed by the positive particle, as shown in example (2) by Thai chây. The corresponding opposite particle can then be used to disconfirm the negative proposition, i.e. English yes and Thai mây chây, respectively. In addition, some languages employ a specific disconfirming particle to contradict a negative proposition, like Swedish in example (3). Here, jo is the alternative to ja ’yes’, which cannot be used to disconfirm a negative proposition.

While HOLMBERG (2016) already deals with answer systems in general and even provides data from a large range of languages, his approach remains rather cursory (as he pursues different goals). I want to add to this a more detailed and comprehensive micro perspective. By making use of data from the North Holland/Croom Helm/Routledge descriptive grammar series, I will present a cross-linguistic survey and evaluation of answer strategies from typologically distinct languages. Since these descriptions are all based on the Lingua Questionnaire (COMRIE & SMITH 1977), they allow for maximum comparability of the data provided. The results will provide an overview of the distribution of the two answer systems across languages as well as further insights regarding possible correlations with other structures.
(1) **Finnish** (HOLMBERG 2016: 54)

\[ \text{lui-t ko sinä tämän kirjan? lui-n. e-n.} \]

read-2SG Q you this book read-1SG not-1SG

‘Did you read this book?’

‘Yes.’ ‘No.’

(2) **Thai** (HOLMBERG 2016: 181)

\[ \text{phiī-chaay mây pay paa-rîit rūu? chây. mây chây.} \]

older-brother NEG go Paris Q right not right

‘Did your brother not go to Paris?’

‘Yes. (He didn’t go.)’ ‘No. (He did go.)’

(3) **Swedish** (cf. HOLMBERG 2016: 165, 167)

\[ \text{har Johan inte kommit? nej jo} \]

has Johan not come no yes

‘Has Johan not arrived?’

‘No. (He has not arrived.)’ ‘Yes. (He has arrived.)’

**References**


