

## REVIEWS

**The syntax of yes and no.** By ANDERS HOLMBERG. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 250. ISBN 9780198701859. \$99 (Hb).

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This monograph is a crosslinguistic investigation of the syntax of yes/no questions and their answers. The idea is that answers to these questions, even when they consist of a single word, are derived by ellipsis from a full sentential expression. Because the elided constituent is identical to the constituent in the preceding question, the syntax of answers turns out to be very much the same as the syntax of questions. The discussions and proposals are based on data from 136 languages, out of which a handful (English, Swedish, Finnish, Chinese, Thai, and Welsh) are selected for closer analysis. The languages have been examined in relation to two parameters of variation, namely, if answer particles (as in 1a) or echoed verbs (1b) are used, and how negative questions (2) are answered.

- (1) Halua-vat-ko he tee-tä? (Finnish)  
 want-3PL-Q they tea-PART  
 ‘Do they want tea?’  
 a. Kyllä.  
    ‘Yes.’  
 b. Halua-vat.  
    want-3PL  
    ‘Yes.’
- (2) Do they not want tea?  
 a. Hai. (Cantonese)  
    ‘Yes.’ (= they do not want tea)  
 b. Nej. (Swedish)  
    ‘No.’ (= they do not want tea)

The idea that verb-echo answers are derived from sentential expressions by movement and ellipsis is uncontroversial and receives support from the fact that in many languages the verb is inflected for tense and agreement. A movement-and-ellipsis analysis is also available for other questions, including alternative (*Do they want tea or coffee?*) and WH-questions (*What do they want?*). The fact that single-word answers to these questions are case-marked indicates that they are part of sentential structure. Verb-echo answers to yes/no questions may then look like 3, while single-word answers to alternative and WH-questions look like 4.

- (3) Haluavat [<sub>NP</sub> He <haluavat> teetä]  
 want they want tea  
 (4) Teetä [<sub>NP</sub> He <haluavat> teetä]  
 tea they want tea

The idea that even particle answers are derived by ellipsis from a sentential expression may seem less straightforward, and it contradicts the idea put forward by, for example, Krifka (2013) that answer particles are clause substitutes. Holmberg aims to show that the ellipsis analysis has wider coverage and more explanatory power, since it is able to capture both verb-echo and particle answers to yes/no questions, as well as answers to other types of questions. Based on Hamblin 1958, 1973, H hypothesizes that knowing the meaning of a question means knowing the set of alternative statements that can constitute its answers. In neutral yes/no questions, the set of alternative statements is restricted to  $p$  and  $\neg p$ , a positive proposition and its negation, and in negative questions to  $\neg p$  and  $\neg(\neg p)$ , a negative proposition and its negation. To capture the idea that a question puts a set of alternative propositions before the addressee and asks them to choose the

one that is the true alternative, H proposes that a question contains an open question variable in the IP. The variable moves, overtly or covertly, to the C-domain in order to take sentential scope. In direct questions, the CP is embedded under Q[uestion]-force, which contributes an invitation to the addressee to assign a value to the variable. The addressee does this by answering the question: the answer contains something that makes value assignment possible. In yes/no questions, H argues, the relevant property is polarity: answer particles like *yes* and *no* are viewed as sentential operators that can apply to a question with an open polarity variable [ $\pm$ Pol] and assign a value, [ $+$ Pol] or [ $-$ Pol], to it.

What answers are possible in negative questions is shown to follow from the idea that a yes/no question contains a polarity variable [ $\pm$ Pol] and that the answer to the question assigns a value, [ $+$ Pol] or [ $-$ Pol], to the variable. The division of languages into those that follow the truth-based as opposed to the polarity-based answer system (i.e. languages where the truth of a negative alternative is confirmed by uttering *Yes*, and languages where it is confirmed by uttering *No*) is argued to be a consequence of differences in syntactic structure and, specifically, differences in the syntax of negation: truth-based answers are utilized in languages and constructions that have low negation, polarity-based answers in languages and constructions lacking low negation. Polarity and negation are viewed as two distinct properties, and the 'wrong' type of answer to a negative question brings about a feature clash.

The book is divided into five main chapters, where Ch. 1 introduces the topic and the problems addressed. The chapter also describes how the data from the 136 languages have been collected: the main sources are the Syntactic Structures of the World's Languages database,<sup>1</sup> various descriptive grammars, online questionnaires, and fieldwork. The languages do not provide a geographically and/or typologically balanced picture, but the author is well aware of this and makes comments about it throughout the book.

Ch. 2 outlines H's view on the syntax of questions. The leading idea that the syntactic structure of a question includes a question variable, which is a disjunctive set of alternatives, is presented and motivated in detail on the basis of Chinese, Finnish, English, and Thai.

Ch. 3 is the core of the book and lays out H's theory of the syntax of answers. Building on the idea that yes/no questions have an open polarity variable [ $\pm$ Pol] in the IP, he proposes that answers are formed by copying this IP and combining it with a valued polarity feature, merged in the focus position in the C-domain. The polarity feature may be overtly realized, in the form of answer particles, or it may be covert and require movement (often the finite verb; and in negative answers, the sentential negation) from the copied IP to the C-domain, as lexical support. The polarity feature assigns a value, [ $+$ Pol] or [ $-$ Pol], to the variable [ $\pm$ Pol] in the copied IP, thereby indicating which of the propositions put forward in the question is the true alternative. The IP can then be elided, under identity with the IP of the question.

Not all languages derive their answers in the same way, of course. There is considerable variation especially in what verb-echo answers can look like, which suggests that there is variation in how they are derived. Languages like Welsh only allow single-verb answers, while Finnish allows strings of verbs; both Welsh and Finnish have verb movement, so it seems plausible to assume that even verb-echo answers can be formed in this way, but because Thai is a language without verb movement, Thai verb-echo answers must be formed in some other way. H proposes that all verb-echo answers are derived by movement and elision, but that languages differ with regard to what is moved and elided. He makes a distinction between languages that derive verb-echo answers by subject pro-drop and VP-ellipsis, and languages that derive them by 'the big ellipsis', that is, movement to C-domain followed by ellipsis of a constituent that is big enough to contain the subject. Welsh, Finnish, and Thai are all shown to be languages with big ellipsis.

In addition to presenting and motivating his view of the syntax of answers, H provides detailed discussions of Welsh, Finnish, and Thai in this chapter. The discussions are at times rather technical and may pose difficulties for readers who are unfamiliar with generative syntactic theory. An important contribution of this chapter, for all readers, is that it discusses crosslinguistic simi-

<sup>1</sup> <http://sswl.railsplayground.net/>

larity and variation in answers to yes/no questions and provides information and analyses that are not available elsewhere. It is shown, for example, that there is no 'preferred' form of answer to yes/no questions: about half of the 136 languages in the sample allow verb-echo answers, either alone or in combination with answer particles. About half of the languages with verb-echo answers derive them by pro-drop and VP-ellipsis, while the other half derive them by big ellipsis. The verb-echo and non-verb-echo languages are geographically equally widespread and cover all of the continents; it is, however, possible to identify areas where one answering system is more dominant than the other one. It also seems that entire language families may have a preference for one of the systems.

Ch. 4 is devoted to negative questions. The distinction between truth-based and polarity-based answer systems (Jones 1999) is discussed and the idea that it is primarily a matter of cultural convention or the meaning of the answer particles is rejected. As noted above, the idea put forward is that the dichotomy is a consequence of differences in syntax and, specifically, differences in the syntax of negation: truth-based answers are used in languages and constructions that have low negation, polarity-based answers in languages and constructions that lack low negation. Since English is a language that can have low, middle, or high negation, it is predicted to allow both truth-based and polarity-based answers. Swedish and Finnish lack low negation and are predicted, correctly, to allow only polarity-based answers. The chapter looks, in some detail and on the basis of a number of languages, at the interplay between positive and negative polarity and negation, and discusses the strategies that languages can use to confirm or contradict the negative alternative. Again, the discussions are rather technical and a reader who is unfamiliar with generative syntactic theory may find them challenging. But the chapter makes an important contribution by presenting information from a large number of languages on how negative questions are answered. H suggests, for example, that truth-based and polarity-based answer systems are equally common among the languages of the world. If a language allows both truth-based and polarity-based answers, the choice between them depends on the bias of the question: if negative, the answer follows the truth-based system, and if positive, the answer follows the polarity-based system. There is no correlation between the truth-based versus polarity-based parameter and the answer-particle versus echoed-verb parameter. By contrast, a correlation exists between the truth-based versus polarity-based parameter and whether the language has special polarity-reversing answer particles. Information of this kind, as H points out, is rarely available in descriptive grammars, so the work he has done in collecting and analyzing the large data sample is invaluable. In terms of geographical distribution, most languages east of India, as far as New Guinea, are reported to follow the truth-based system, while most languages in Eurasia, from India westward, follow the polarity-based system. The fact that languages in one and the same language family can utilize different answering systems can be taken as a sign that the choice of answering system is affected by language contact.

Ch. 5 briefly discusses cases where *Yes* and *No* are rejoinders that express agreement or disagreement with a preceding statement (*They want tea*), as well as the structure of yes/no questions that have narrow focus (*Is it tea that they want?*) and their answers.

The monograph makes an important contribution to the study of yes/no questions and their answers. This is a vastly understudied area in most approaches to syntax, and the little work that exists has primarily focused on how questions are formed, not on how they are answered. The same is true of the treatment of yes/no questions and their answers in descriptive grammars. For theoretical linguists, the monograph presents an interesting and well-argued case of how a seemingly trivial act—just uttering *Yes* or *No*—can be the result of a very complex derivation. For both theoretical linguists and scholars of typological and descriptive linguistics, the monograph presents interesting analyses and a wealth of data from a large number of languages from all continents of the world.

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**Beyond aspect:** The expression of discourse functions in African languages. Ed. by DORIS L. PAYNE and SHAHAR SHIRTZ. (Typological studies in language 109.) Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015. Pp. vii, 321. ISBN 9789027206909. \$149 (Hb).

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This volume presents a series of corpus-based studies analyzing the various grammatical devices used to express discourse functions and to structure narratives in some ten African languages. Thanks to the editors' efforts in setting up comparative concepts, the scope of this book doubtless goes far beyond African linguistics and should interest descriptive linguists and typologists, as well as specialists of discourse studies. The book opens with an introductory and synthetic chapter by the editors. The nine following articles, each devoted to studies on particular languages, are then ordered along language families (or phyla) of Africa.

In their substantial introductory article 'Discourse structuring and typology: How strong is the link with aspect?' (1–22), SHAHAR SHIRTZ and DORIS PAYNE very clearly define the scientific context and the general approach used here. As a common ground, the authors propose to rely on Labov and Waletzky's (1967) definitions of (a) 'narrative' as a sequence of nonoverlapping (thus bounded and perfective) events, and (b) the MAIN EVENT LINE (henceforth MEL, identified here with 'foreground') of a narrative as including propositions expressed in an isomorphic (or iconic) order to the story events. Based on previous studies and the studies in this book, Shirtz and Payne have identified seven major types of verbs or constructions used crosslinguistically to communicate FOREGROUND or MEL, in opposition to devices for BACKGROUND or non-MEL: (1) verbal constructions coding past-perfect(ive) or at least bounded or completive tense-aspect semantics, (2) verbal constructions coding 'situational dependency' (Robert 2010) of that proposition on some frame of reference, (3) syntactically independent clauses, (4) syntactically dependent clause chaining, (5) clause conjunction, (6) Austronesian-type voice, and (7) word order. Elaborating on these various points, they have discovered that there is not always a correlation between the MEL and grammatical aspect: the putative correlation between past-perfective tense-aspect forms and expression of the narrative MEL is not universally valid. After summarizing the main contributions of the various articles, Shirtz and Payne briefly present three specific models, all grounded in cognitive linguistics, which have been fruitfully used by several authors in this book for analyzing discourse structuring: those of Fauconnier (1994 [1985]), Dinsmore (1991), and Botne and Kerschner (2008). They rightfully conclude with a broader invitation for typology and cognitive sciences to collaborate on investigating the grammar-discourse interface in a crosslinguistic perspective.

The Nilo-Saharan family is illustrated first by Doris Payne's 'Aspect and thematic clause combining in Maa (Nilotic)' (23–52). This article is remarkable both in the thorough analyses conducted on a corpus of narratives and in the use made of Fauconnier's (1994 [1985]) model for this analysis of discourse structuring. Exploring whether this language has a dedicated morphosyntax for coding the temporally sequenced MEL in discourse, Payne first demonstrates that, though it can occur on sequential and semantically perfective main events, the uses of the so-called narra-