Chapter 1

The meaning of Czech response particles

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This article deals with the semantics and interpretation of Czech response particles *ano* 'yes' and *ne* 'no'. Based on two experiments involving responses to negative polar questions, we argue that *ano* 'yes' encodes the relative feature [AGREE] and *ne* 'no' encodes the absolute feature [−], adopting the parlance of roelofsen-farkas15 feature model. This contrasts with the proposal of **gruet2016yes**, who argues, following previous work on English, that both of the Czech response particles are ambiguous between a relative and an absolute reading. We also find some tentative evidence for context affecting the interpretation of response particles, in line with the predictions of **hrd+:krifka13**.

response particles, answer, syntax, semantics, pragmatics

1 Introduction

Response particles like *yes* and *no* are a common way to respond to polar questions. They exhibit anaphoric behavior in that their interpretation crucially depends on previous context and, more specifically, on the form and interpretation of the polar question they respond to. While responses to affirmative questions are largely unproblematic, responses to negative questions give rise to ambiguities (**Kramer.Rawlins2011**, **espinal2019response**, **roelofsen-farkas15**, **hrd+:krifka13**; etc.); see hrdsim:ex1 and hrdsim:ex2, respectively. (The translations in (??B) are tentative and will be rectified in view of the experimental results.)

  A:[] Zalil Petr květiny?
watered Petr flowers
'Has Petr watered flowers?' B:[] Ano. (= Zalil.) / Ne. (= Nezalil.)

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yes watered no NEG.watered
'Yes. (= He has.) / No. (= He hasn't.)'
    A:[] Nezalil Petr květiny?
NEG.watered Petr flowers
'Hasn't Peter watered flowers?' B:[] Ano. (= Zalil / Nezalil.) / Ne. (= Zalil / Nezalil.)
yes watered NEG.watered no watered NEG.watered
'Yes. (= He has. / He hasn't.) / No. (= He has. / He hasn't.)'
(translations tentative; to be rectified)
If the polar question is negative, as in hrdsim:ex2, both *ano* 'yes' and *ne* 'no' can in principle correspond to a positive or a negative answer. They can, however, differ in naturalness and likelihood. To give an example from German, **claus2017puzzling** found out that it is more natural to confirm negative questions by *ja* 'yes' than by *nein* 'no'.

Using a version of the truth-value judgment task, we investigate the meaning of the two Czech response particles – *ano* 'yes' and *ne* 'no', hoping to contribute to related recent literature on Slavic languages (e.g. **gruet2016yes**, **esipova2021polar**, **Geist.Repp2023**). A more specific goal is to evaluate the adequacy of two types of existing accounts of response particle meaning: the feature model of **roelofsen-farkas15**, in which response particles have a lexically specified range of meanings, and the saliency account of **hrd+:krifka13**, in which the meaning is expected to be more context-dependent. We also discuss our results in view of gruet2016yes analysis of Czech response particles, which is couched in the feature model. We conclude that our data primarily support a particular version of the feature model, though not the one proposed by **gruet2016yes**. More specifically, we see a very clear tendency for *ano* 'yes' to express agreement (the feature [AGREE]) with its antecedent, be it positive or negative, and *ne* 'no' to express a negative proposition (the feature [−]), independently of the polarity of the antecedent. What counts as the "antecedent" is crucially modulated by the interrogative strategy used: negative polar questions with an interrogative syntax (verb-first) primarily contribute a positive antecedent (i.e., the negation is, by hypothesis, "pleonastic"), while negative polar questions with a declarative syntax (non-verb-first) contribute a negative antecedent (negation is semantic/propositional). Even though the feature model appears to be most suitable for modelling our results, we also observe – in a subset of our data – a statistically significant result predicted by hrd+:krifka13 saliency theory.

The article is structured as follows. §**??** briefly introduces the two approaches under consideration – the feature model (**roelofsen-farkas15**) and the saliency theory (**hrd+:krifka13**). We also discuss gruet2016yes particular application of the feature model on Czech. §**??** reports on the experiments we have conducted: