

## A Comparative Study of Responses to Negative Questions in English and Indonesian

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### ABSTRACT

This study mainly discusses how responses to negative questions are given in English and Indonesian. The data are taken from conversations in talk shows, *Just Alvin* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The findings show that in English, the pattern of responding to negative questions is polarity-based. They also show that English speakers are close-observant to it as all the data exhibit 100% conformity with the pattern. Yet, in Indonesian the pattern is truth-based. However, Indonesian speakers sometimes shift to the polarity-based pattern, suggesting high flexibility in Indonesian syntax.

**Keywords:** Comparative Study, Responses, Negative Questions

### Background of the Study

Language is a part of a culture; however, a theory termed language relativity argues a more profound view: that people's cultures significantly influence their languages (Yule, 2006: 218). Being the medium of communication, language becomes a product of people's thought, ideas, views, beliefs, values, etc, and hence the use of language must be in line with that of what people perceive as culture. Gudykunst, et al. (1988) argue that the language people speak is a reflection of their cultural values. Also, it is a basic knowledge that people coming from different cultural backgrounds have different speech styles (Wiezerbicka, 1994). Kadarisman (2009) provides relatively plenty examples of language relativity, some of which are dissimilarities of greetings among cultures. In Indonesian context, there is only one greeting to express when referring to particular time after dusk: Indonesians would simply say "*Selamat malam*". However, in English context, there are two greetings available to be expressed in the same time of the day: "Good evening" or "Good night". Halliday (1977:34) maintains that language is structured on how it meets its speakers' needs. That said, chances are, each language may possess some unique attributes from the result of adjustments that the speakers have made to achieve the objective of communicativeness. Hymes (1974:446) mentions that each community has differences in terms of numbers and variety of significant speech style.

In today's era, people's scopes of interaction are exceptionally wide. As a consequence, it is crucial that mutual understanding be obtained by those who socialize with people having different cultures to prevent failures from occurring during the communication. In addition, the success of intercultural communication is determined not only by the speakers' skill to speak the language, but also by understanding the cultural values of the people they are communicating with (Rusdi, 2006). When learning a new language, in fact, very often people encounter obstacles due to dissimilarities of components of their first language and the second language. One common view in linguistics is that property of autonomy that covers distinctiveness and independence of a linguistic system, either in partial or as a whole (Fishman, 1972a:19). An example of this would be dissimilarities between Indonesian and English.

Holmes (1992) proposes that language varies from group to group and style to style. Considering that "language as a whole are reflective of the speech communities employing them" (Fishman, 1972b: 296), it is safe to assume that each group produces different styles in

terms of language features, one of which is how people response to a negative question. It has been observed that English speakers pay close-observance to the grammar of responding to negative questions. In contrary, it has also been detected that many Indonesians are often unacquainted with their own grammar on the topic of responding to negative questions; there were times when irregularities were discerned. This suggests that the inconsistency involves contradiction between yes and no. In fact, when standing alone an answer particle appears to stand in syntactically for the entire sentence (Kramer&Rawlins: 2010). As a consequence, the disparity between English and Indonesian can result in very severe misinterpretation among the speakers. In order to comprehend the concept, take a look at two examples below.

Supposedly this is a conversation between a snake charmer and a contestant of a challenge reality show. The contestant is dared to put his hands into a basket loaded with venomous rattle snakes. He asks the snake charmer if the snakes are venomous and the charmer replies the snakes are, hence he holds back any temptation to make fuzz with the snakes. In English the conversation will more or less be like this:

(Example 1) Contestant: Aren't these serpents venomous?  
Snake charmer: Yes, they are

The contestant puts his hands inside the basket so carefully that he does not get bitten. However, a little more dreadful scenario will apply if the snake charmer by chance is a confused Indonesian who misunderstands English. Intending to say that the serpents are deadly, he says the opposite due to the influence of his mother tongue.

(Example 2) Contestant: Aren't these serpents venomous?  
Snake charmer: No, they are.

The contestant takes the first word coming of his sentence, boldly puts his hands inside, wants a little more adrenaline so he plays his fingers a bit with the rattle snakes, and a couple hours later he is a dead man.

Saville-Troike (2006:34) suggests that systematic comparison of two languages and cultures needs to be performed in order to prepare up-to-date pedagogical and experimental materials. The concept is known as Contrastive Analysis.

### **Contrastive Analysis Theory**

Contrastive Analysis (CA) attempts to predict and explain hindrances that learners may confront as they are learning a language other than their own mother tongues. When two languages and cultures are compared systematically, it can be foretold which part will cause difficulties in the learning and which part will not. There is a supposition in CA that is the existence of the so-called transfer in language learning in terms of certain components in L1 into the L2. The transfer is termed positive when a structure applies in both languages and eases the learning. On the contrary, the transfer is termed negative when a structure in the L1 does not apply in the L2 and hence causes interference. Nonetheless, many experts start to question the relevance of CA, since not all errors could be predicted from the source language as many of them were distinctive and did not reflect the structure of L1 (O'Grady & Debrovolsky, 1989:299), but its employment becomes undeniable due to persistent cases of English teachers in Indonesia being burdened by transfer of errors predicted in CA hypothesis (Kadarisman, 2009:2).

### **Negative Questions in English**

Negative questions are negative questions characterized by the presence of negative markers inside them. Negative questions, according to Foley and Hall (2003: 90) are composed by adding *not* or *n't* to a form of *be* or to the auxiliary.

Examples: *Don't you like the pasta?*

*Is the president not coming to the spaceship launching today?*

### **Positive Responses to Negative Questions in English**

Positive response to negative questions is *yes*.

Example: *Isn't that your father? Yes.*

*Did you not tell me you went to Boston? Yes, I did (tell you).*

### **Negative Responses to Negative Questions in English**

Negative response to negative questions is *no*.

Example: *Haven't they travelled to the core of the earth? No.*

*Were you not dating her? No, I weren't (dating her).*

### **Negative Questions in Indonesian**

According to Edizal (2000), in Indonesian an interrogative is often placed at the beginning of the sentence. To make a negative question, people use *tidak* or *bukan* that have similar meaning as *no* in English. Thus, negative questions in Indonesian are formed by putting an interrogative at front, followed by the negation immediately. Examples: *Apakah kamu tidak mengerti?* (=Don't you understand?)

*Tidakkah kamu menyukainya?* (=Don't you like her?)

### **Positive Responses to Negative Questions in Indonesian**

Examples: *Tapi nggak frustrasi?* (= But you weren't frustrated?)

*Ya iya lah.* (=Yes, of course. I was crying at that time.)

*Tidak bisakah saya izin besok?* (= Can't I have a day off tomorrow?)

*Ya bisa dong, sms saja ya?* (Yes, you surely can. Just send a text.)

### **Negative Responses to Negative Questions in Indonesian**

Examples: *Jadi kucing kamu ini nggak manja?* (= So, isn't your cat needy?)

*Iya lah, orang jarang ketemu juga.* (= Yes, she barely sees me.)

*Bukan kucing persia ya ini?* (= Isn't she a persian cat?)

*Ya, ini aslinya Burmese, kok.* (= Yes, she's actually a Burmese cat.)

### **Patterns of Responding to Negative Questions**

According to Holmberg (2011:1-2), there are two patterns in responding to negative questions: polarity-based and truth-based. Polarity based is a common pattern shared by languages such as English, Finnish, French, and Swedish. It requires the decision to the response to be based only on the positive idea within question. Therefore, to respond to a negative question in a language in which the pattern is present, one should use a positive answer particle to express affirmation, and a negative answer particle to express negation. See a Swedish example below as illustrated by Holmberg (2011:2)

Q: *Dricker dom inte kaffe?*

*drink/they/not/coffee*

*'Don't they drink coffee?'*

A: *Nej.*

*no \*'They don't drink coffee.'*

The second pattern, truth-based, is a typical pattern shared by languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Russian (Holmberg, 2011:2) as well as Korean and Hausa ([www.cambridge.org/TGE-Chapter4-pdf/](http://www.cambridge.org/TGE-Chapter4-pdf/)). The pattern requires the decision to the response to be based on the entire negative idea within question. In fact, as this pattern treats a negative question as an inversion of a positive one, the responding pattern is also different. Negative answer particles are used to express affirmation and positive answer particles are used to express negation.

Below is a Korean example of negative question and its positive response as illustrated in [www.cambridge.org/TGE-Chapter4-pdf/](http://www.cambridge.org/TGE-Chapter4-pdf/)

Q: Neolswu-eps-ni?

You/come/can/- neg-ques?

Can't you come?

A: A-ni,naka-l- swuiss-e

No/I/come/can/be- dec.

No, I can come.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design. First, this study is a descriptive as it aims at describing the characteristics of a phenomenon of responses to negative questions in English and Indonesian (Johnson & Christensen, 2004: 347). Second, it is a qualitative as it aims at obtaining information on the nature of responses to negative questions in English and Indonesian (Johnson & Christensen, 2004: 362). The data in this study are in the forms of spoken discourses from conversations in two talk shows: *Just Alvin* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The sitcoms were selected since both of them represent more or less similar plots that serve natural conversations between a host and guest stars who are mostly celebrities. Seventeen transcriptions of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episodes were also taken from the Internet to amplify the justification of the conversation, regarding some problems that may occur in terms of listening reliability due to the researcher's being not a native English speaker. The researcher was the key human instrument in the study and supported by some other instruments which were videos and the transcripts. Firstly, the whole shows are watched carefully to fully understand the context. Secondly, the parts in which there were responses to negative questions were noted and isolated. Thirdly, all the data in each language will be split based on two categories: positive responses to negative questions and negative responses to negative questions. The data were identified from all conversations, then were tabulated accordingly to the language, and lastly were described why differences occur in the two languages.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Basically there are two manners of how English speakers reply to negative questions: When they support the statement within the question, the response will be positive. Otherwise, when they deny the statement inside, the response will be negative. As English adopts a polarity-based pattern to responding to negative questions, one should only take the whole positive idea inside a question to decide whether the answer should be an affirmation or a negation. Furthermore, when somebody agrees with the negative questions, the given answers will be affirmations to that positive ideas, which are expressed in positive answer particle 'yes'—or 'yeah'. Conversely, when somebody disagrees with the negative question, the given answers will be negative, which are expressed in negative answer particle 'no'.

### **Positive Response to Negative Questions in English**

People give positive response to negative questions in English as what inside their minds are consistent with the whole idea of the questions. The context in example (1) is Oprah interviewing Jay Leno about his being expelled from the show he had been hosted for years and how he was feeling about those who had fired him.

(1)

Oprah : Did you **not** feel disrespected by the NBC executives?

Jay Leno: Oh yeah, I most certainly did.

As shown by illustrations, in English it is the positive part of the whole question that is taken into account in deciding whether the answer will be ‘yes’ or ‘no’. In example (1) Oprah asked Jay Leno if he had—or not—felt disrespected by the executives of NBC station. He picked only the whole positive idea of the question, and took it no differently from which of the positive form.

In order to better understand the idea of ‘picking the whole positive idea of the question’ and ‘taking question no differently from which of the positive form’ example (2) is supplied below. The negative marker in the question is omitted.

(2)

Oprah : Did you feel disrespected by the NBC executives?

Jay Leno: Oh yeah, I most certainly did.

In brief, a negative answer to either a positive or negative question in English has the same meaning. As a matter of fact, negative and positive questions are semantically identical, although pragmatically it is not always the case (Sudo, 2011) as some other bias may be deliberately given by the asker (Romero&Han: 2004).

### **Negative Response to Negative Questions in English**

In English, people give negative responses to negative questions as what they perceive are contradictory with the whole positive idea inside the questions.

The context in (3) is when a female singer Lady Gaga was asked by Oprah whether she had to call her Lady or Gaga.

(3)

Winfrey : So I don’t have to say Lady Gaga?

Gaga : No, I don’t like that actually.

English speakers take the whole positive idea of the sentence into the consideration whether the answer will be ‘yes’ or ‘no’. As the whole positive idea that Oprah asked in her question contradict their thoughts so that they response negatively using “No”. Gaga contradicted Oprah’s positive statement that she had to call her completely: Lady Gaga—because in fact, she was not into it.

### **How English Speakers Perceive the Pattern of Responding to Negative Questions**

In this section it is demonstrated how English speakers perceive their language pattern of responding to negative questions. Below are the tables and the statistic.

### English Speakers' Perceived Pattern of Responding to Negative Questions

	Responses					
	Positive			Negative		
	Grammatical	Ungrammatical	Total	Grammatical	Ungrammatical	Total
	9 (100%)	0 (0%)	9	36 (100%)	0 (0%)	36
<b>Total</b>	9 (100%)	0 (0%)	9	36 (100%)	0 (0%)	36

The table shows that all of the negative responses were given grammatically according to the standard grammar of English. With the level of deviation as much as 0% it is careful enough to pinpoint that the pattern of answering negative questions is a uniformed principle which is closely-observed by the speakers of English.

### Responses to Negative Questions in Indonesian

There are two ways of how they reply to negative questions in Indonesian. As Indonesian possesses a truth-based pattern in terms of responding to negative question, it requires the speaker to do the other way around as it is in English. The basis for determining whether to respond affirmatively or negatively to a negative question is the whole negative idea it has within. This way, negative questions are treated inversely than positive questions. Therefore, when they support or agree with the statement within the question, the response will also be positive, but the answer particles should be negative. On the contrary, when they deny or challenge the negative statement inside the question, the response will also be native, but the answer particles should be positive.

### Positive Responses to Negative Questions in Indonesian

In Indonesian context, people are supposed to give a negative answer particle to show affirmation to a negative question. Context in example (4) is Alvin Adam, the host of *Just Alvin*, asking Ello, a singer, if he was at that time not only focusing on singing.

(4)

Alvin: *Tapi sekarang fokusnya nggak cuman nyanyi deh ya?*

But/now/focus/not/only/singing/?

But you don't focus only on singing, right?

Ello: *Nggak. Kalo aku disuruh main yang lain, harus apa, akting atau gimana, aku nggak bisa deh.*

No/If/I/be asked/to/play/other/things/must/what/acting/or/how/I/not/can/

No. If asked to do other things; be it acting or anything else, I'm not capable of doing that.

In example (4) Ello was asked if he was not only focusing on singing, hence he picked the negative idea contained by the question, and since he decided he was only focusing himself on singing, he gave an affirmation using a negative answer particle *nggak*.

To facilitate the better discernment of the pattern of responding positively in Indonesian, some people have developed certain explanation on that. Holmberg (2011), for example, has his own approach to add a statement of "Is it the case that" + the negative question. People can also state "Do you agree that" + the negative question.

(5)

Alvin: **Is it the case that** you don't focus only on singing?

Ello: No **(it is the case that I don't focus only on singing)**

Yes **(it is the case that I don't focus only on singing)**

This concept of giving negation as an affirmation may be best described by a mathematic concept below:

**(-) negative (-) negative = (+) positive**

In other words, given that a question is **(-) negative** then it is responded with a **(-) negative** answer particle, then the intended meaning of **(+) positivity** will be obtained.

**(6)**

Alvin: *Sebelumnya **nggak** (a-) menikmati hidup?*

You didn't enjoy life before?

Lola: ***Nggak** (b)*

No.

As a means of expressing affirmation in Indonesian as it is shown in example **(6)**, it takes a negative question (marked by **a-**) and a negative answer particle *nggak* (**b-**) to achieve the intentional meaning which is positive.

### **Negative Responses to Negative Questions in Indonesian**

In Indonesian people are supposed to give negative responses to negative questions as what they perceive contradicts the negative idea within the questions.

The context in example **(7)** is Ayu Dewi, a celebrity, telling Alvin Adam that her parents never showed their grievance in front of her, and Alvin Adam asking whether they really not knew what her parents were actually feeling.

**(7)**

Alvin: *Tapi kita gak pernah tahu apa yang ada di hati masing-masing ya?*

But/we/not/ever/know/what/which/there/in/heart/each/yes/

But we don't know what's on their minds, do we?

Ayu: *Ya.*

Yes.

The example shows that Ayu Dewi took the whole negative idea of Alvin Adam's question because she agreed with Alvin's idea that they did not know how her parents felt. She then responded negatively by using positive answer particle *ya* or yes. What she intended to convey when doing so was that she was expressing "Yes, I agree that we do not know what is on my parents' minds."

### **Indonesian Syntax Flexibility in Responses to Negative Questions**

Alwi et al. (2003:20) argue that regardless of having ones, for some reasons Indonesian is away from being employed by its speaker in the standardized forms. The fact is particularly observable in the discussion of responding to negative questions. The regular findings of responses to negative question have turned out to be insufficient as some variations are also detected. Essentially what appears to be variation in the structure of responding to negative questions in Indonesian is when the speakers switch from truth-based pattern into the polarity-based pattern.

Indonesian syntax owns a property of flexibility which enables an utterance be constructed without necessarily being similar to its original grammar while keeping the fundamental meaning intact. The same flexibility applies in the discourse of responding to negative questions in Indonesian. Even to use *ya/tidak* (= yes/no) to refer to the same thing do not seem to make any contrast misinterpretation in the use; the interlocutors would still understand what the speakers say without being misled.

### Indonesian Syntax Flexibility in Responses to Negative Questions in Which Positive Responses Are Given in Positive Answer Particles

In example (8) the context is Alvin asking a prominent choreographer, if he had not been frustrated the first time he flunked his dancing exam.

(8)

Alvin: *Tapi nggak frustrasi, Ari?*

But/not/frustrated/Ari/

But you weren't frustrated?

Ari: *Ya iya lah, Kak. Itu kan nangis pada saat itu.*

Yes/yes/\*particle/That/\*particle/at/time/that/

Yes, of course. I was crying at that time.

The example shows that he responded positively using a positive answer particle *ya* or *yes*. What he meant is that he had been frustrated and even crying at that moment he failed his first dancing test.

### Indonesian Syntax Flexibility in Responses to Negative Questions in Which Negative Responses Are Given in Negative Answer Particles

Discussed previously, there is syntax flexibility when Indonesian speakers shift from using truth-based pattern into polarity based-pattern when responding to negative questions. Context in example (9) is Alvin Adam asking April Jasmine, if she had no psychological difficulty to be close with an *ustadz* (Islamic teacher)

(9)

Alvin: *Nggak ada hambatan psikologis apapun dekat dengan seorang ustadz?*

Not/there/difficulty/psychological/any/close/with/an/ *ustadz*?

Isn't there any psychological difficulty to be with an *ustadz*?

April: *Nggak... Justru malah merasa senang.*

No/In fact/even/feel/happy/

No. In fact I'm happy.

Her purposeful meaning is that she had no difficulty to be with an *ustadz*, and she was, in fact, happy. As it should be in any polarity-based languages, it is the whole positive idea inside questions that they have to pick up to determine whether the answer should be affirmative or negative. That way, when answering negative questions negatively, they turn around the answer particles. What should be answered with 'yes' in Indonesian is reversed to be 'no'.

### How Indonesian Speakers Perceive the Pattern of Responding to Negative Questions

In this section it is presented how Indonesian speakers perceive their language convention of responding to negative question. Numbers of responses are counted and percentages are generated based on the counting. Below are the tables.

**Indonesian Speakers' Perceived Pattern of Responding to Negative Questions**

		Responses				
		Positive		Negative		
	Truth-based	Polarity-based	Total	Truth-based	Polarity-based	Total
	3 (100%)	2 (40%)	5	23 (64%)	13 (36%)	36
<b>Total</b>	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5	23 (64%)	13 (36%)	36



The statistic shows visible findings that not all of the responses were all expressed as how they should be in the pattern of responding to negative questions in Indonesian. Conversely, two sets of data out of five positive responses and 13 sets of data out of 36 were given not in accordance to the pattern of truth-based. Such findings can be evident of uniformity Indonesian speakers perceived their own pattern regarding responding to negative questions in Indonesian. As 40% variations in which people shift from truth-based into polarity-based pattern occurs in terms of responding positively to negative questions and 36% occurs in terms of responding negatively to negative questions, and the speakers' observation towards their pattern of responding to negative questions is somewhat vague.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATION

Responses to negative questions split into two major categories. They are positive responses and negative responses. In English, the basic pattern of responding to negative questions adopts a procedure, termed polarity-based pattern which is closely-observed by the speakers. Meanwhile in Indonesian, the fundamental pattern of responding to negative questions is a truth-based pattern. This pattern is complete opposites of polarity-based pattern. However, sometimes they shift from the truth-based pattern to the polarity-based pattern; it is suggesting the high syntax flexibility on how people should respond to negative questions in Indonesian. The findings are expected to be a reference for those learning the languages and it is suggested that further studies be conducted for the sake of its betterment.

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Negative Questions in English. Do you want to learn English? Don't you want to learn English? Negative questions can be very confusing, even for native speakers. In this lesson, I teach you how to ask these questions, and how to answer them. Aren't you glad that I can teach you these things?! Of course you are. That's why you subscribe to my channel, isn't it? Related Lessons. Grammar: How to ask questions correctly in English " Embedded Questions English Grammar " UNLESS & IF NOT " negative conditional Yes/No questions for advanced English students 3 ways to express negativ... Grammar rules for the answers to negative questions can be confusing. Yes/No negative questions should be answered the same way as positive questions. With negative questions that require a yes or no, there can sometimes be confusion in the correct way to answer. Grammatically, you may assume that a negative question answered in the affirmative should be a negative statement (i.e. "Doesn't it look good?" "Yes it doesn't"). A friend of mine teaching in Vietnam was told that this was given as a rule by one of her fellow teachers, as taught in a reference book. A common example in English would be "Aren't you going?" or variations of this form. Consider these two examples: "I need a lift to town, are you going to the cinema this evening?" Questions and negatives. Level: beginner. Yes/No questions. Yes/No questions are questions which we answer with Yes or No. Look at these statements: They are working hard. They will be working hard. What subjects does everyone have to study? Which newspaper do you prefer, The Times or the Guardian? Wh-questions 2. GapFillTyping\_MTY1ODU=. Questions with how. We use how for many different questions: How are you? How do you make questions in English? How long have you lived here? How often do you go to the cinema? How much is this dress? How old are you? How many people came to the meeting? Questions with how 1.