

On two varieties of negative polar interrogatives in Japanese

Introduction: It has been observed in the literature (e.g., Ladd 1981, Romero & Han 2004, Asher & Reese 2007) that negative polar interrogatives often (though not always) convey an epistemic bias toward a specific answer, and that the bias could be either positive or negative.

(1) (negative interrogative without a bias; A and B are making a list of teetotalers.)

A: Bill does not drink. – B: Okay. How about John? Does he not drink either?

(2) (negative interrogative with a positive bias)

A: John is such a linguist. – B: Yeah, doesn't he even speak Japanese?

(3) (negative interrogative with a negative bias)

A: There is nothing John can help with here.

B: Doesn't he even know how to keep accounts?

This work demonstrates that Japanese has two varieties of negative polar interrogatives. They contrast information-structurally, and as a consequence, tonally as well.

The two varieties: One variety, which we call the P (positive)-type, often (though not always; see below) conveys a positive bias. In the P-type, the negation is part of information-structural ground (non-focus), so that the pitch movements within the word containing the negation are compressed (i.e., what Sugahara 2003 calls “post-focus reduction” takes place; see also Kori 1997). (4) illustrates the P-type interrogative with a positive bias; in the numbered examples to follow, boldface and italic respectively indicate retainment and compression of pitch movements due to a lexical accent (H*+L) and/or a phrase tone (H-).

(4) (There are two bottles of sake without labels. A and B are trying to figure out which one is sweet and which one is dry. They taste sake from one of the two bottles. A feels like it is the sweet sake and asks:)

amaku nai? ([sweet.Inf][NegAux.Prs]) ‘Isn't it sweet?’

The other variety, the NN (negative/neutral)-type, allows either the negative bias or neutral interpretation (the neutral interpretation is possible only when the meaning of the negated predicate is contextually prominent). In the NN-type, the negation is part of the focus and the word containing the negation is not tonally compressed. (5) (with a negative bias) and (6) (without a bias) exemplify the NN type:

(5) (A eats a piece of orange and makes a grimace. B asks:)

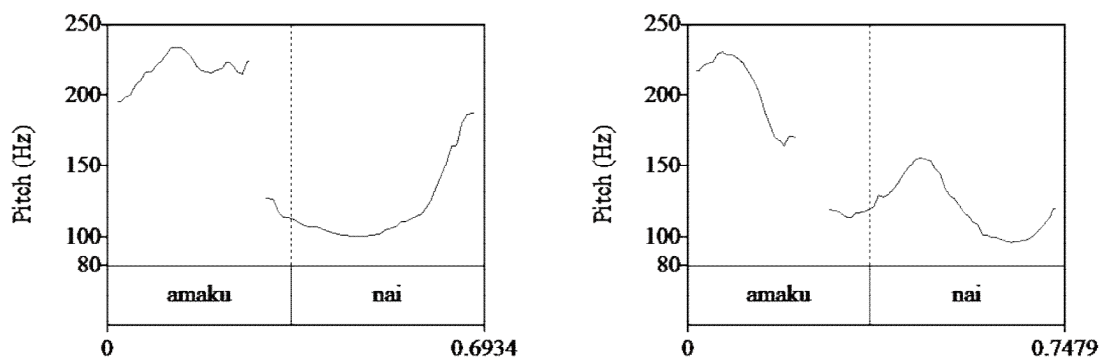
amaku nai? ([sweet.Inf][NegAux.Prs]) ‘Isn't it sweet?’

(6) (A and B are throwing away magazines that they both have read. A says: “I'll keep this one because I haven't read it. How about this one? ...)

(mada) **yonde (i)nai?** ([yet][read.Gerund][IpfvAux.Neg.Prs]) ‘Have you not yet read it?’

Figure 1 illustrates the F0 contours of (4) and (5); the key tonal contrast is the presence/absence of the steep pitch fall due to the lexical accent nucleus on /na/ (further production data collected through an experiment will be presented in the talk).

Fig. 1 The P and NN pronunciations of ‘amaku nai?’ (‘Isn't it sweet?’)



The P- and NN-types roughly correspond to Ladd's (1981) “outside NEG” and “inside NEG” interrogatives. The NN-type licenses a negative polarity item such as *amari* ‘quite’, but is not

compatible with a positive polarity item such as *kanari* ‘fairly’; the P-type exhibits the opposite pattern. The NN-type is like negated declaratives in that the negation within it is part of the focus (negation in general tends to be part of the focus, as pointed out in Kori 1997). The observations regarding NPI/PPI-licensing and information-structural configuration suggest that the negation in the NN-type is a “genuine” negation, while the one in the P-type is not (in the pre-theoretical sense).

The two types also contrast in the ways that they are combined with the auxiliary *n(o)da* and the particle *no*. In the case of the NN-type interrogative, *no/n(o)da* follows the negated predicate, as in ‘Amaku nai no?’. With the P-type, negation appears on the auxiliary *n(o)da*, as in ‘Amai {nodewa/nja} nai?’.

Tonal neutralization: The illustrated tonal contrast can be neutralized when the predicate is a simple verb form (without an auxiliary), such as *tabenai/tabenakatta* (as opposed to *tabete iru, tabete kureru*, etc.). This is because in such cases the word containing the negative (derivational) suffix *-(a)na* will not be tonally compressed as long as the meaning of the verb stem is part of the focus. Thus, (7) conveys a positive bias in parallel to (8), but has the same tonal pattern as the NN-type interrogative (9) (with a negative bias) does.

(7) (In the morning, Mrs. Abe tells her husband that she will give sardine to their new cat, who has been fussy about her food. Later in the day, Mr. Abe came across the previous owner of the cat and learns that the cat loves sardine. He comes home in the evening and asks his wife:)

(iwashi) **tabenakatta?** ([sardine][eat.Neg.Pst]) ‘Didn’t she eat the sardine?’

(8) (Mrs. Oda says that her cat had mackerel yesterday. Mr. Oda thinks she is mistaken and asks:)

iwashi-o tabenakatta? ([sardine-Acc][eat.Neg.Pst]) ‘Didn’t she eat sardine?’

(9) (Mrs. Eto gave sardine to her cat. 15 minutes later, Mr. Eto notices that the sardine is still in her food bowl. He asks her:)

(iwashi) **tabenakatta?** ([sardine][eat.Neg.Pst]) ‘Didn’t she eat the sardine?’

More on the meaning of the P-type: The P-type interrogative cannot always be translated into an English negative interrogative, having a distinct use where it does not convey an epistemic bias but indicates that Speaker considers the core proposition (without negation) possible based on some information that may not be available to Hearer. This second use is illustrated in (10), where the chance of the core proposition’s holding is merely 10%.

(10) (Speaker is looking for her friend Yamada, and knows that he is visiting one of the 10 rooms in the dormitory. She decides to check the rooms one by one. She first goes to room #1, and asks the resident:)

Nee, Yamada-kun **kite nai?** ([hey][Yamada-Suffix][come.Gerund][Ipfv.Neg.Prs])

‘Hey, is Yamada here, by any chance? (lit. Hasn’t Yamada come?)’

The effect of using the P-type interrogative in such a situation is similar to that of adding a phrase like: “You may be surprised by my asking this, but (is *p* the case?)”.

More on the meaning of the NN-type: It is said that the English inside NEG interrogative does not only convey a negative epistemic bias but indicates that the bias has been formed “on the spot”, in the discourse situation (as in (3) above). A similar observation applies to the Japanese NN-type, but it can also be felicitously used when (the “inference on the spot” condition is not met but) Speaker considers the core proposition undesirable.

(11) (A and B are working in a room without a window. They hope that it is not raining. They believe that it is unlikely to be raining, but still are worried that it might. A goes out to check the weather and comes back. B asks A:)

Doo? Futte **nakatta?** ([how][fall.Gerund][Ipfv.Neg.Pst])

‘How was it? Was it raining? (lit. Wasn’t it raining?)’