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(Article begins on next page)

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## **Confirming or asserting? Conflicting values and cross-linguistic influence in the use of *yes/no* particles in Italian L2<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*Yes* and *no* allow an easy management of talk-in-interaction and, unlike other classes of discourse markers, occur from early stages of L2 acquisition onwards (Perdue 1993; Bernini 1996, 2000; Andorno 2008a for Italian L2). However, problems in their use can arise in replies to negative utterances such as “Didn’t you hear the news?”, “You didn’t read the news, did you?”, as in this case speakers have to choose one of the two conflicting values possibly encoded by the particles: either asserting a positive/negative polarity for the proposition at issue; or confirming/reversing the negative polarity conveyed by the previous speaker. Since Pope (1973), a distinction has been drawn between languages with polarity-oriented particles, such as English *yes/no*, and languages with agreement-oriented particles, such as Japanese *hai/ie*.

The study compares the use of Italian *sì/no* and other routines - such as echo-constructions - in native speakers and L2 learners with either a polarity- or an agreement-oriented L1. Results show that cross-linguistic influence can affect the use of *sì/no* in L2, as pointed out for other domains of pragmatic competence (Gass & Selinker 1992; Kasper 1992; Jarvis & Pavlenko 2008). Furthermore, they show that, even when learners lack pragmalinguistic competence in the use of particles, they treat reversing and confirming replies differently, thus revealing a sociopragmatic sensitivity similar to native speakers in recognizing the markedness of disagreement replies.

**Keywords:** discourse markers, Italian L2, polarity, agreement, pragmatic transfer

### **0. Introduction**

Discourse markers are a well-known area for their difficulty in second language acquisition and use: both underuse of the class as a whole, and misuse or overuse of specific classes or specific markers have been reported for second language production in different target languages, in different learners' groups and acquisitional settings (Hays 1992; Romero Trillo 2002; Hellerman & Vegun 2007; Polat 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> The study was jointly conceived and carried out by both authors. For the requirements of Italian Institutions, we declare Cecilia Andorno responsible for par. 0., 1.1., 1.2., 3 and Fabiana Rosi for par. 1.3, 2; both authors are responsible for par.4. We wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a previous version of the paper.

Many reasons have been singled out as causes for this widespread phenomenon, mainly linked to the semantic properties of the class. Discourse markers are often polyfunctional and contribute a pragmatic rather than a semantic meaning to the utterance: this causes a lack of transparency in their function and a lack of obligatory contexts of occurrence. Moreover, at least for some subsets of the class, such as modal particles, prosodic and distributional properties result in low salience despite their possible high frequency in discourse (Möllering 2004). Individual and sometimes idiosyncratic differences have been reported in use (Polat 2011; Bu 2012), but some general tendencies have been observed as well: among them, the positive effect of exposure to the target language (TL) and input and integration within the TL speakers' community (Hellermann & Vergun 2007; Romero Trillo 2002; Giuliano et al. 2015). Transfer from the L1 also proved to play a role, at least when presumed similarities between lexical pairs are established (Bazzanella & Borreguero Zuloaga 2011). Transfer or borrowing of discourse markers, especially from the pragmatically dominant language, also proved to play a role among bilingual speakers in many cases of language contact (Matras 2000, 2007; Dal Negro & Fiorentini 2014 for Italian).

In order to investigate the role of transfer on second language acquisition of discourse markers, the current study takes into account a set of highly frequent and salient discourse markers, namely the semantic equivalents of English *yes/no* in Italian L2 used as 'affirmators' (Moravcsik 1971), found in replies to polar questions and assertions. *Sì* and *no* are among the most frequent words in spoken Italian<sup>2</sup> and, at least in the above-mentioned use, their initial position in the turn is highly salient and their meaning quite consistent: as is the case for their English counterparts, on the ideational<sup>3</sup> level they respectively assign a positive and a negative polarity value to the propositional content at issue (in ex. (1): "John hearing the news"); as a consequence, on the interpersonal level, they respectively confirm and reverse the propositional content proposed by the interlocutor:

- |   |                          |                              |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| (1) <i>Gianni ha sentito le novità?</i> | <i>Sì, le ha sentite</i> | <i>No, non le ha sentite</i> |
| ('Did John hear the news?')             | ('Yes, he did')          | ('No, he didn't')            |

It does not come as a surprise that *sì/no*, as well as their lexical equivalents in other languages, are found even in the first stages of learner varieties (cf. Bernini 1996, Andorno 2008a for Italian L2; Klein & Perdue 1992, for several Germanic languages). Nevertheless, ideational and interpersonal functions interplay in rather subtle ways, and the specific contexts we are interested in could cause specific difficulties. Some further examples will illustrate the point:

- |   |                               |                              |
|---|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| (2) <i>Gianni non ha sentito le novità?</i> | <i>Sì / No, le ha sentite</i> | <i>No, non le ha sentite</i> |
| ('Didn't John hear the news?')              | ('Yes, he did/No, he did')    | ('No, he didn't')            |

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<sup>2</sup> They are listed at the 24th and 25th position in the list of the most frequent words in the LIP reference corpus for spoken Italian (De Mauro et al. 1993).

<sup>3</sup> We use *ideational* and *interpersonal* according to Halliday's model of Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1994). The ideational function refers to the construal and representation of experience; the interpersonal function refers to the management of social relations between participants.

Example (2) shows that, in replies to negative utterances, the matching of ideational and interpersonal functions changes when compared to replies to positive utterances: a reply asserting a positive value for the proposition at issue reverses the interlocutor's utterance; a reply asserting a negative value confirms the interlocutor's utterance. This different mapping proved to have an impact in the choice of particles among native speakers, in that *no* (reversing the proposed negative content) may be used instead of *sì* (asserting a positive value) for positive replies (Andorno & Rosi 2015). On the contrary, native speakers only use *no* (asserting a negative polarity value) for negative replies: *sì* as a possible marker of confirmation is discarded. Other languages present similar asymmetries (cf. Holmberg 2013 for English *yes/no*).

This study aims at comparing the use of *sì/no* in replies to negative utterances by Italian native speakers (NSs) and L2 learners (NNSs)<sup>4</sup> of different L1s, in order to find out whether differences can be observed, and whether such differences can be linked to crosslinguistic influence or to more general factors of language acquisition or language use.

We suppose that, despite the overall high frequency of *sì/no* in the input, the contexts described in (2) constitute a difficult sub-area for their use because of their relatively lower frequency, their greater complexity in terms of assumptions and of the specific mapping of ideational and interpersonal values. We hypothesize that as a consequence, particles are avoided and alternative strategies are used, and/or a possible effect of transfer shows up in the choice of particles, as languages in the world adopt different solutions when such a conflict arises.

Use of *sì/no* in such contexts turns out to be an appropriate area for disentangling the different factors involved in discourse marker acquisition. On the one hand, replies provide an obligatory context where the usage made by native speakers and learners can be compared and causes of avoidance singled out. On the other hand, *sì* and *no* are both frequent and salient in input, so that only a lack of transparency can explain their possible avoidance or misuse in conflicting contexts, where learners may exploit their previous pragmatic competences concerning language use in interaction, in order to cope with the double task of asserting a propositional content at the ideational level and signaling agreement or disagreement with the interlocutor at the interpersonal level.

## **1. Theoretical framework**

### **1.1. Parameters for a cross-linguistic analysis of *yes* and *no* in replies**

As Moravcsik's (1971) seminal paper pointed out, not all languages in the world possess a class of affirmators, that is particles used in replies to polar questions. Some languages, such as Irish, use elliptical verbal sentences to this end (ex. in Bernini 1990):

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<sup>4</sup> From now on, 'L2 acquisition' is meant as acquisition of a language after puberty; 'L2' is therefore meant as any language learnt after puberty.

- (3) *An bhfaca tú Seán? Ní fhacas*  
 INTERR see:PAST:3SG you John NEG see:PAST:1SG  
 ('Did you see John? No, I didn't')

Moravšik supposes that elliptical or echo sentences are available in any language; nevertheless, it must be observed that they have a different degree of grammaticalization in different languages. For instance, English has a more grammaticalized construction than Italian, as it can bear inflected auxiliaries (ex. 4), while in Italian both the main verb and its arguments have to be explicitly encoded (ex. 5):

- (4) Did you see John? **I did**  
 (5) *Hai visto Gianni? L' ho visto* (\*L'ho/\*Ho visto/\*Ho)  
 have:2SG see:PRT John PRON:3SG:M:SG have:1SG see:PRT  
 ('Did you see John? I did')

Replies such as Italian *l'ho visto* in (5) would constitute more a discursive than a systemic resource: a short reply including verb repetition and ellipsis/pronominalization of its arguments - is possible, provided that relevant information is contextually available, but all syntactic dependencies need to be expressed.

The semantics of affirmators, for languages which have such a specific set of particles at their disposal, has been described as a combination of polarity (positive/negative) and agreement (confirming/reversing) values, acting respectively on the ideational and on the interpersonal levels and resulting in four possible meanings: confirmation of a positive assertion; confirmation of a negative assertion; reversing of a positive assertion; reversing of a negative assertion. According to Moravšik (1971) and Pope (1973), languages rarely include a set of four particles. More frequently, they map polarity and agreement onto two or three particles. Two main mapping systems have been identified since Pope (1973): they are exemplified in Table 1 by English and Amharic.

	English		Amharic	
	Positive reply <i>I did</i>	Negative reply <i>I didn't</i>	Positive reply <i>I did</i>	Negative reply <i>I didn't</i>
Positive question <i>Did you go?</i>	yes	no	'awōn	yelleṃ
Negative question <i>Didn't you go?</i>	yes	no	yelleṃ	'awōn

**Table 1: Particles in replies to polar questions in English (polarity system) and Amharic (agreement system).**

The difference illustrated in Table 1 has been widely studied in the literature through the dichotomy between "polarity" (as English *yes-no*) and "agreement" (as Amharic *'awōn-yelleṃ*) systems of particles. The main idea underlying the dichotomy is that the particles encode either an ideational value, namely the polarity claimed by the addressee for the proposition at issue (polarity systems), or an interpersonal value, namely the addressee's confirmation or reversal of the claim made by the speaker's utterance (agreement systems).

A few words are needed here to give a more precise description of the kind of utterances the particles reply to. Although Moravcsik (1971) and Pope (1973) only refer to replies to polar questions, it has been made clear in subsequent studies that such particles are used in replies to assertions as well. Now, the difference in illocutionary force between questions and assertions is relevant for the pragmatic role of particles in replies. Through a polar question, a speaker explicitly asks the addressee to assign a polar value to the proposition at issue; through an assertion, he commits himself to the truth-value of the proposition and may then ask the addressee to agree with him: therefore, in replies to assertions not only does a polarity value have to be assigned but the previous speaker's commitment also has to be taken into account and evaluated. Moreover, it has been observed that, unlike positive questions, negative questions are biased, as they signal an assumption on the part of the questioner that a negative value for the proposition is possibly the case (Bolinger 1957; Bublitz 1981; Sadock & Zwicky 1985; Carletta et al. 1996). According to this view, the distinction among questions and assertions is not dichotomic, but rather scalar; negative/positive questions and assertions can be ordered on a scale of increasing confidence signalled by the speaker in his own assumptions concerning the truth-value of the proposition at issue.

The addressee may react by signalling his own commitment towards the propositional content at issue, either on the ideational level, assigning a positive or a negative polarity to the proposition, or on the interpersonal level, confirming or reversing the previous speaker's assumptions.

Systems of particles often present asymmetries, which may show up in the number of particles: for instance, German and French have two forms for positive replies (GER: *ja* for confirmation/*doch* for reversal, FR: *oui* for confirmation/*si* for reversal), but only one form for negative replies (GER: *nein*; FR: *non*); Romanian possesses two particles for positive and negative replies (*da*, *nu*) and one form for reversal (*ba*), which may be combined with *da* and *nu* (*ba da*, *ba nu*). Farkas & Bruce (2010) predict the direction of possible asymmetries on the basis of markedness criteria. Reversing replies are marked from a conversational point of view, because the default behaviour expected in a conversation is that speakers agree. Reversing an assertion is more marked than reversing a question. This is because in the former case the speaker commits himself to the truth-value of the proposition and the reply has to react to this commitment, while in the latter such a reaction is not needed, as the speaker does not commit himself to any truth-value - although he can have expectations about it. Therefore, languages are expected to have more explicit forms for reversing than for confirming, and for reversing assertions than for reversing questions.

Asymmetries can also arise in the use of particles, especially in replies to negative utterances: as an example, in such contexts, English *yes* has either a positive or a negative interpretation (= *I did*; *I didn't*), but *no* only has a negative interpretation (Holmberg 2013); instead, Italian *sì* is only used as a positive reply, while *no* is used for both positive and negative replies (Andorno & Rosi 2015). Variation in interpretation and use is a crucial phenomenon, for at least two main reasons. First, it shows that speakers perceive particles as potentially able to code either ideational or interpersonal values - at least in some circumstances - thus

weakening the boundaries between agreement- and polarity-oriented systems. Second, it leads to the search for the relevant parameters that may describe such a variation. To this end, the markedness criteria already mentioned to explain asymmetries in systems turned out to be significant in describing asymmetries in use. In Andorno & Rosi (2015), we demonstrated that variation in the use of Italian *no* as a positive reply is linked to the illocutionary force of the utterance to which it replies: *no* mostly occurs after assertions (ex. 6), and is far less frequent after questions (ex. 7):

- (6) INT: *e quelle comunque non erano in francese.*  
i06: **no.** *erano in francese -,*  
(INT: and these however were not in French. i06: **no.** they were in French -.)
- (7) INT: *non sapeva le cose?*  
i06: *no no le cose le sapeva!*  
(INT: he did not know things? i06: **no no.** he knew!)

Similar observations have been drawn for agreement particles. Kameyama (2013) suggests that Japanese *hai* and *iie* do not confirm or reverse the actual form of the sentence they reply to, but rather the assumptions the speaker conveys with it. Kameyama does not specify how the speakers' assumptions are identified, both by the addressee and by the researcher, but the examples show that contextual cues provide useful information and prosodic cues among them. For instance, in examples concerning negative utterances, negative assumptions are conveyed by an assertion while positive assumptions are conveyed by a question.

We hypothesise that adult native speakers perceive subtle linguistic hints coming from the discourse - even when they are not aware of them- and use them to recognize interlocutors' assumptions and to cope with them, consequently adapting their own contribution. A lack of pragmalinguistic competence could however show up in second language speakers, both in the failure to recognize the linguistic means used to convey stronger or weaker assumptions and in unsuitable choices made when selecting the proper linguistic means the reply.

## **1.2. Discourse markers in L2 for ideational and interpersonal meaning.**

The delay of acquisition and use of discourse markers in second language speech has often been attributed to their weak and elusive semantic content, acting on textual and interpersonal rather than ideational levels. Learners may lack both a clear comprehension of their function in discourse and an urgent need to use these markers in their own speech, as long as the ideational meaning is preserved.

On this basis, Scarcella (1983) hypothesised that discourse markers with stronger semantic content are acquired earlier than those with merely pragmatic functions. This has been confirmed by many studies concerning different acquisitional environments. Romero Trillo (2002) points out that the same lexical items, namely *well* and *you know*, are used in English L2 with their ideational meaning far before their pragmatic use as discourse markers. Within Italian second language speech, Ferraris (2004) and Andorno (2008b) find

similar results for semantic/pragmatic connectives *ma*, *però* ('but'), *invece* ('instead'), *anche* ('also'), and Andorno (2007) observes that uses of *così* ('so') as an exemplifier occurs later than deictic uses. The early occurrence of *sì*, *no*, *anche* in Italian L2 is connected to their usefulness in simple constructions (Andorno 2008a; Bernini 1996), where they also occur as pro-rhematic elements:

- (8) \IT\ *hai visto - qualche partita di calcio, di football?*  
      \MK\ *football no*  
      (IT\ Have you seen any football matches? \MK\ football no)

Because of their ideational value as markers of polarity, and their possible integration into the structure of utterances in such constructions, the status of *sì* and *no* as discourse markers has been challenged or claimed to be restricted to cases where only interpersonal functions are at work.<sup>5</sup> However, even early occurrences in second language speech show that the two values are intertwined. When *sì* and *no* are used in replies to questions and assertions, ideational and interpersonal functions are at play at the same time, thus calling for a joint investigation of the development of their uses.

To our knowledge, no survey so far has investigated the use of affirmators in second language speech in the interplay between ideational and interpersonal functions, and we are not aware of studies concerning their use in second language speakers with different L1s. This topic has rather been examined in L1 acquisition by Choi (1991), who studied the acquisition of affirmators in English, French, and Korean children. The developmental patterns reported are similar in the three samples: the particles are first used as a turn-taking strategy, later on they encode polarity and finally agreement values. Indeed, English children displayed no notable difficulties with *yes/no*, encoding affirmative/negative meaning; French children encountered problems only with the contrapositive form *sì* and its reversing function; Korean children experience difficulties in acquiring the discourse markers *ing/ani*, coding agreement/disagreement. The study confirms that in L1 acquisition ideational meanings are acquired earlier than interpersonal ones.

### 1.3. Transfer at semantic and pragmatic level

The possible use of *sì/no* as markers of agreement by learners with an agreement-oriented L1 would be a case of semantic transfer, that is "use of a target-language word with a meaning that reflects influence from the semantic range of a corresponding word in another language" (Jarvis & Pavlenko 2008:75). However, as *sì/no* in such contexts perform speech-acts, and convey a pragmatic meaning together with a semantic one, the phenomenon would also be described under the domain of pragmatic transfer, in which "transfer is investigated in relation to how language learners and bilinguals perceive and perform speech-acts in one or both the languages they know" (Jarvis & Pavlenko 2008:107). Previous research on pragmatic transfer further differentiates pragmalinguistic transfer, defined as the process whereby "particular linguistic material

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<sup>5</sup> For this reason, *sì* and *no* are treated in two different chapters of Renzi's reference grammar, respectively in chapters devoted to pro-sentential elements (Bernini 1995) and to discourse markers (Bazzanella 1995).



in L1 influences learners' perception and production of form-function mapping in L2" (Kasper 1992:209), and sociopragmatic transfer, more related to the way the set of social norms that shape the communicative behaviour of the L1 linguistic community influences the understanding and interpretation of TL speakers' behaviour. As an example, the ability to comprehend when an apology is due during an interaction is a matter of sociopragmatic competence, whereas the knowledge of appropriate expressions for apologizing refers to the pragmalinguistic level.

In the domain of use of affirmators in L2, both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic transfer effects have occasionally been observed. A case of pragmalinguistic transfer in the use of *sì/no* in Italian L2 has been incidentally observed by Bernini in Tigrinya speakers (Bernini 1996, note 10; see also Andorno & Rosi 2015):

- (9) \IT\ *ancora non hai lavoro?*  
\MK\ *io? sì:\_ no*  
\IT\ *cioè non ce l'hai\_ [ride]*  
\MK\ *sì\_*  
(‘\IT\ don’t you have yet a job? \MK\ me? Yes no \IT\ That is to say you do not have it, do you? \MK\ yes (= I don't)’)

The learner MK in ex. (10) uses *sì* twice to confirm the (negative) propositional content proposed by the interviewer's, contrary to TL use, and possibly because of a transfer from Tigrinya and/or Amharic source languages.

An instance of sociopragmatic transfer in the use of *no* in replies is reported by Yamagashira (2001), who observed that Japanese-speaking learners of English tend to avoid the use of *no* in negative replies and prefer nonverbal replies instead: such a phenomenon may be grounded on politeness strategies of the L1, in which direct refusals are considered as highly impolite.

In second language acquisition, pragmatic transfer was investigated later than transfer on morphological and syntactic levels (Kasper 1996; Kasper & Schmidt 1996). Although there is a short tradition in such studies, pragmatic transfer proved to have widespread effects on both L2 production and comprehension. Among the conditions under which pragmatic transfer occurs (pragmatic transferability, cf. Takahashi 1996), an often mentioned factor is learners' (either wrong or right) perception or assumption of similarity between target and source (SL) languages, that is between the language to be learnt and other known languages: the more learners establish correspondences between SL's and TL's structures, the more they transfer SL structures into the L2. However, assumed, perceived and actual similarities do not have the same effect and do not work in the same way at different linguistic levels (cfr. Ringbom & Jarvis 2009). More specifically, results from Ringbom (2001) suggest that learners assume that languages are formally different until similarities are observed, but semantically and pragmatically similar until differences are observed (see also Jarvis & Pavlenko 2008). Therefore, while transfer at the morphosyntactic level has as its main source languages that are perceived to be similar to the target language, semantic and pragmatic transfer mostly occur from

languages in which learners are more proficient and/or with which they are familiar, and mostly from the L1, irrespective of cross-linguistic similarities.

Many cases of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic transfer have been observed, despite the actual and perceived distance between source and target language: for example, Bebee et al. (1990) report that Japanese-speaking learners of English transfer different L1 pragmatic strategies in English refusals, e.g. the use of philosophical statements or suggestions to support refusals, a solution not found in English native speakers; Takahashi (1996) observed that Japanese-speaking learners of English judge the appropriateness of several speech-acts in English on the basis of both linguistic structures and social behaviour of their L1.

A negative correlation has been pointed out between pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency, as it has been previously found for morphosyntactic features (Gass & Selinker 1992). Studies on the acquisition of English requests by Chinese speakers (Bu 2012) and of English refusals by Persian speakers (Hashemian 2012) reported the fact that in the initial acquisitional stages the lack of knowledge of TL models leads learners to rely more on the L1 model, whereas more advanced learners are more able to rely on TL models and stay away from transfer. Moreover, pragmatic transfer has been inversely correlated with the length of exposure to TL input in a natural environment (Yamagashira 2001), which allows not only for developing L2 pragmalinguistic competence, but also for acquiring experience of sociopragmatic target models, thanks to more frequent contact with a wider range of situational contexts for different speech acts. The longer the learner is immersed in an L2 environment, the greater decrease is found in the occurrence of pragmatic transfer, as learners become more familiar with pragmatic strategies of the target community.

Pragmatic transfer may, however, be limited by an explicit enhancement of potentially misleading contexts. For instance, Kasper (1989) observed that the usually transferred mitigating routine *I mean* in English L2 conversations by German speakers was not used by 29 German-speaking learners, who declared that they had received explicit dissuasive instructions by their teachers about the use of such language-specific routine.

## **2. Data collection and annotation**

### **2.1. Participants and elicitation procedures**

We compared two subsets of data from Italian Native Speakers (NSs) and Italian Non-Native Speakers (NNSs).

The NSs were 9 students of foreign languages at the University of Genoa and Pavia. None of them learn languages with an agreement oriented system. The NNSs were 27 foreign students: 21 Erasmus students at the University of Genoa with different L1s; 4 Chinese students enrolled in the Marco Polo Program at the University of Pavia; 2 Japanese students attending a private language school in Reggio Emilia. Both the NSs' and NNSs' samples are homogenous for a set of variables potentially relevant to the phenomenon at issue,

such as age, education level, and lifestyle. As all speakers live in university cities in the northwestern part of Italy, they are exposed to similar regional and social varieties of Italian input.

At the time of the elicitation sessions, the NNSs were studying in Italy for at least 3 months. Their proficiency in Italian was assessed as B1+ level of the CEFR (2001), and they were all enrolled in classes training them for the B2 level. Several L1s are represented; with regards to the issue investigated, learners have been divided into two subgroups: native speakers of languages which are mainly polarity-oriented (6 L1s, 14 students) and native speakers of languages with a mainly agreement-oriented system (4 L1s, 13 students).

Data were collected by means of two dialogic tasks, each involving one participant and one researcher:

- an interview in which the researcher asks the experimental subject questions about her/his knowledge of foreign languages, experiences in studying abroad, habits and attitudes toward foreign languages and local dialects;
- a Map Task (Anderson et al. 1991), that is a cooperative task involving two participants each having a map in their hands and not able to see each other. One participant, called the “Giver”, has a route marked on his map; the other, called the “Follower” has not; the goal is to reproduce the Giver’s route on the Follower's map. In our Map Tasks, the experimental subject plays the role of Giver, while the Follower is played by the researcher.

Our corpus of analysis consists in the replies given by the subjects to negative utterances (from now on: stimuli) by the researchers. As we were interested in these specific stimulus-reply pairs, researchers were trained to formulate utterances in a negative form as frequently as possible, and the tasks were selected as suitable to provide several quite natural contexts for the occurrences of such pairs. In the Map Task, the two maps are not identical, but the participants are not aware of this at the beginning of the interaction: this causes false expectations on the shared common ground and the frequent need for checks, that are often performed through negative utterances. Similarly, in the interview, the researcher produces negative polar questions and assertions in trying to assess the specific linguistic profile of the participant, as shown in the following excerpt:

(10) INT: *perché: in: Mongolia # non si può studiare l'italiano?*

m01: *sì sì # perché: in Mongolia non c'è: # insegnante: # italiano.*

INT: *okay.*

m01: *non c'è ambasciata italiana.*

INT: *non c'è l'ambasciata italiana?*

m01: *sì sì sì.*

(‘INT: because: in: Mongolia # it is not possible to study Italian? m01: yes yes (= it is not) because: in Mongolia there is not: # teacher: # Italian. INT: I see. m01: there is no Italian embassy. INT: There is no Italian embassy? m01: yes yes yes. (= there is not)’)

As example (10) also shows, interactions are mainly centred around information the experimental subject has, in the role of giver or interviewee, and the researcher, in the role of follower/interviewer does not have and needs to acquire. Therefore, the majority of communicative exchanges are information-seeking: the researcher asks for information or checks the information he has; the experimental subject replies in confirming or reversing the information proposed by the researcher. In other, less frequent cases, the interviewer seeks for the interviewee's opinion, either with questions or with assertions:

- (11) INT: *eh non sarebbe male come: come esperienza*  
 i05: *no infatti # a parte che: comunque è un arricchimento culturale*  
 ('INT: it would not be a bad experience. i05: no that's true # besides it is a cultural enrichment in any case')

In such cases, the role of negation in utterances is slightly different: unlike information-seeking utterances, these opinion-seeking utterances suggest that according to the interviewer's belief a negative value is not only possible but also expected (in ex. 11: "it would not be a bad experience, would it?"). When opinions are exchanged, the pragmatic need for face-managing work rises up and this may have an effect on the interviewee's choice for particles. For this reason, we only included in our database stimulus-reply pairs where information, not opinions, are exchanged.

In this paper, only data from interviews are analysed, in both L1 and L2 data<sup>6</sup>. More specifically, these include 242 replies to negative stimuli produced by native speakers and 835 replies used by non-native speakers. Table 2 provides a summary of the dataset.

	Ita NSs	L1s with polarity-oriented systems of affirmators						L1s with agreement-oriented systems of affirmators			
		Eng	Spa	Tur	Fre	Ger	Rom	Chi	Mon	Jap	Pol
Subjects	9	2	2	2	4	2	2	4	3	2	4
Contexts	242	56	43	71	109	69	72	148	62	99	106

Table 2: The dataset<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2. Data transcription and annotation

The data were audio-recorded; they were then segmented in turn units and transcribed following the CHILDES protocol (MacWhinney 1995); each turn unit was aligned with its transcription, by using the Transcriber editor (trans.sourceforge.net).

<sup>6</sup> In Andorno & Rosi (to appear), data coming from L1 interviews, the L1 experimental map task and a map task extracted from the reference Italian Corpus CLIPS are compared and a convergence among tendencies in the three data-sets is found.

<sup>7</sup> The L1s are English, Spanish, Turkish, French, German, Romanian, Chinese, Mongolian, Japanese, Polish. L1's classification is based on studies over systems of affirmators (Moravcsik 1971, Pope 1973, Charezińska 1981, Farkas & Bruce 2010; Kitagawa 1980, Kameyana 2013; Morris-Jones 1999) and on reference grammars: Underhill (1976) and Kornfilt (1997) for Turkish; Fisiak et al. (1978) for Polish; Günther (2001) for Mongolian; Alleton (1976) and Gao (2000) for Chinese.

The relevant stimulus-reply pairs were then extracted and coded with regards to four parameters. The first two are independent variables and concern the assumptions conveyed by the stimulus and the reply towards the propositional content at issue, as illustrated in the following list.

1. The declarative or interrogative form of the stimulus (coding values: assertion, ‘ast’; question, ‘quest’). This parameter was selected as a cue to the strength of the assumptions conveyed by the speaker in the stimulus. Following the relevant literature, we assumed that all stimuli, because of their negative form, would convey the hint that the non-validity of the propositional content at issue is possibly the case, and we traced a difference concerning the speakers’ confidence in this assumption: an assertion conveys a higher degree of confidence, and a question conveys a lower one. As assertions and questions in Italian are mainly marked through prosody (Maiden & Robustelli 2007)<sup>8</sup>, utterances were coded on the basis of a perceptual prosodic analysis<sup>9</sup>: a gradually descending prosodic contour was coded as ‘assertion’, conveying a higher degree of confidence; a rising prosodic contour was coded as ‘question’, conveying a lower degree of confidence.

2. The polarity assigned to the propositional content by the interlocutor in the reply, as it is inferable from subsequent speech and context (coding values: positive, ‘pos’; negative, ‘neg’; ambiguous or non-polarized replies, such as *non so* (‘I don’t know’) and replies without explicit reference to the proposition at issue were both excluded from the study). It is worthwhile to remember that when the value is positive the speaker is rejecting the stimulus’ negative assumption; when the value is negative, the speaker is confirming this assumption.<sup>10</sup>

The last two parameters are dependent variables and concern the form of the reply. We considered:

3. The type of particle occurring at the beginning of the reply (coding values: ‘s’ for *sì*; ‘n’ for *no*; ‘other’ for other particles; ‘\’ for absence of any particles<sup>11</sup>);

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<sup>8</sup> The interrogative prosodic contour most widely described has a final rising contour, and “a combination of the nuclear pitch accent and boundary tone play a role in distinguishing questions from statements” (Grice & Savino 2003. See also Canepari 1980; Avesani 1990). Other scholars have observed the prosodic realization of check questions, that is, biased questions asking for a confirmation, coming to similar conclusions: ‘tentative checks’, less confident checks have a rising prosodic contour, similar to neutral questions; confident checks have a gradually descending prosodic profile, otherwise typical of an assertion (Interlandi 2004; Savino 2005). Interlandi’s data are particularly significant for this study, as they refer to northwestern Italian speakers -northwestern Italy being the area where our corpus was collected. However, similar observations are drawn by Savino (2005) for different regional varieties.

<sup>9</sup> The reliability of the prosodic coding given by the two authors was checked against the coding of a sample of the data by five external coders, experts in prosody. Inter-coder agreement reaches 95% for the sample.

<sup>10</sup> In the interviews, some negative questions arise as a partly conventionalized strategy for topic change (see Bernini, 1995 for similar cases). In the following example, after a discussion concerning the use of local dialects, the interviewer asks about other dialects by means of a negative question, conveying a very weak negative bias, due to the fact that such dialects have never been mentioned up until now:

INT: e dialetti di altre parti d'Italia non ne senti qui? (“what about dialects from other parts of Italy, don’t you hear them here?”) Such cases have not been included in the counting.

<sup>11</sup> A more fine-grained analysis of the prosodic/phonetic realization of the particles *sì/no* (reduplications; lengthening and emphasis; prosody) was taken into account but not included in the current analysis.

4. The occurrence of further linguistic material, apart from the particle and eventually occurring in the subsequent part of the turn, which we called “expanded replies”. They can include further details or explanations:

(12) INT: *e invece l'italiano non:: non l'hai studiato # prima di venire?*

t02: *sì. ho studiato # ad Istanbul.*

(‘INT: and instead didn’t: didn’t you study Italian # before leaving? t02: yes I studied # in Istanbul.’)

or it can incorporate part of the stimulus’ linguistic material, in different forms of elliptical, echo-replies: either an exact repetition of the predicate, with the same polarity intended for the proposition at issue (13), or a partial repetition of the predicate, without the verb (14); or the repetition of a constituent as a thematic element, followed by *sì/no* carrying the intended polarity value (15).

(13) INT: *&ahah! non parla bene.*

c01: *sì -, non parla bene.*

(‘INT: &ahah! she does not speak well. c01: yes -, she does not speak well.’)

(14) INT: *ma giapponese non l'hai fatto a scuola.*

f03: *sì -, a scuola.*

(‘INT: but Japanese you did not take it at school. f03: yes -, at school’)

(15) INT: *ma forse non erano madrelingua # i tuoi insegnanti.*

f03: *n::: alcuni sì.*

(‘INT: but maybe they were not native speakers # your teachers. f03: n::: some of them yes’)

Given the role played by elliptical replies in many languages (cf. par 1.1), we treated them separately from other forms of replies (coding values: ‘echo’ for echo replies; ‘other’ for other kind of linguistic material; ‘\’ for replies only composed by a particle).

### 3. Results

In the following paragraphs we will briefly sketch the results for NSs (3.1.); we will subsequently describe and compare the two NNSs corpora: learners with a polarity-oriented L1 and with an agreement-oriented L1 (3.2.). Both the use of particles and the form of the subsequent part of the turn have been considered. We ran Pearson's Chi-tests on the distribution of *sì* and *no* in positive and negative replies for each of the three groups (NSs, learners with polarity-oriented L1s and learners with agreement-oriented L1s) and on between-groups comparisons.

#### 3.1. Native speakers

##### 3.1.1. Particles

Figure 1. compares the use of particles in negative confirming and positive reversing replies.

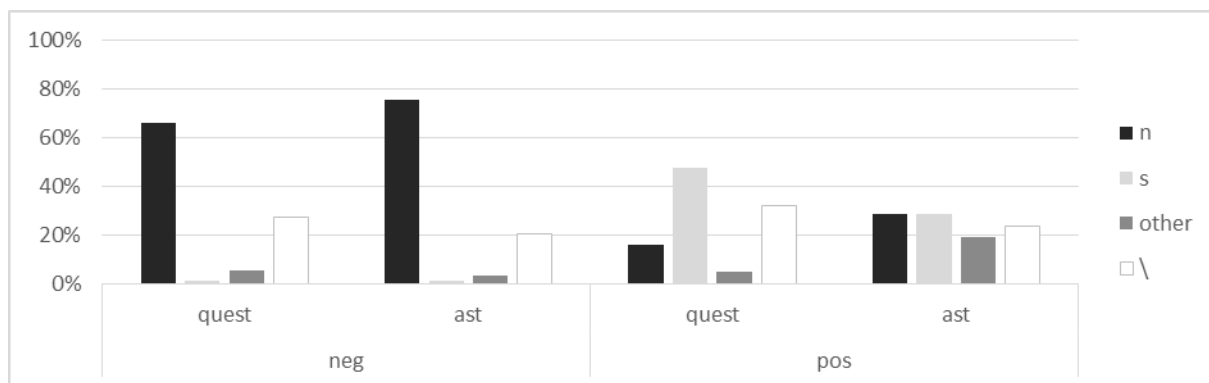


Figure 1: Native speakers. Use of particles for negative confirming and positive reversing replies.

*Sì* and *no* are mostly used to encode polarity: in negative replies mostly *no* (70% for assertions and 65% for questions), and only rarely *sì* (1 and 2%) are used; in positive replies, *sì* is the most frequent particle (29 and 48%). Such a difference in distribution of *sì* and *no* in negative vs. positive answers is highly significant ( $p < .001$ ). However, in positive replies, and especially in replies to assertions, a percentage of *no* also occurs (29 and 16%). These results lead us to say that, when speakers have to reverse the interlocutor's assumptions, the need for an explicit marking of disagreement rises, and *no* can be used to this end. In such cases, *no* loses its value as marker of polarity and works on the interpersonal level as a marker of disagreement.

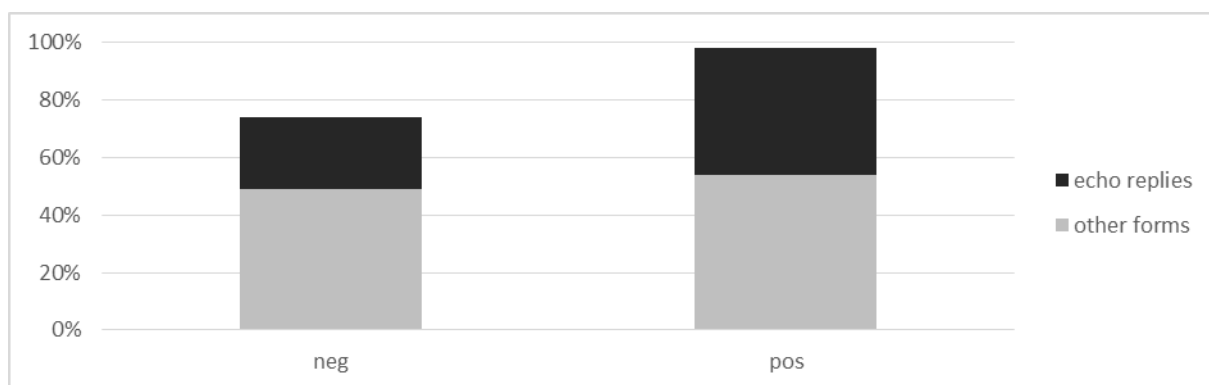
Other markers are rarely used in negative confirming replies (2 and 5%), but their use increases with positive reversing replies (19 and 4%). This is the case of *bè* (*well*) in ex. 16, which marks a partial disagreement (cf. Pauletto & Bardel, this issue):

- (16) i07: *c'era il lettore -, però: ## &mh: somma -,*  
 INT: *non era bravo*  
 i07: *&mh: &ah &bè il lettore sì -, ci faceva fare conversazione insomma.*  
 ('i07: there was a lecturer -, but ## &mh let's say -, INT: he wasn't good. i07: &mh &ah &well the lecturer yes -, he had us practicing conversation let's say')

Other markers include *ma*, *esatto*, *esattamente*, *certo* (see Andorno & Rosi 2015 for further details). The percentage of replies without particles is quite stable (around 20 and 30% for all replies).

### 3.1.2. Expanded replies

Figure 2. compares the frequency of replies including further linguistic materials, in negative and positive replies.



**Figure 2: Native speakers. Frequency and form of expanded replies for negative confirming and positive reversing replies.**

Negative confirming replies often include further linguistic materials (74%), and this is almost always the case for positive reversing replies (98%). Echo replies comprise about 1/3 of negative replies, but about 1/2 of positive replies. We consider this result a sign that, when speakers need to reverse the interlocutors' assumptions, they tend to use more explicit strategies, and they adopt echo structures as a routine to this end. Indeed, the frequency of echo structures in negative confirming vs. positive reversing replies is significantly different ( $p < .05$ ).

To sum up, we confirm the use of *sì* and *no* as polarity particles by Italian native speakers, but some variation is observed for positive reversing replies, where the use of *no* as a marker of disagreement is also observed. No significant variation is observed for *sì*, which always occurs as a marker of positive polarity. Results from both the use of particles and the form of the reply confirm the markedness principles proposed by Farkas & Bruce (2010): reversing, and especially reversing an assertion, is conversationally marked and tends to be more explicitly signalled.

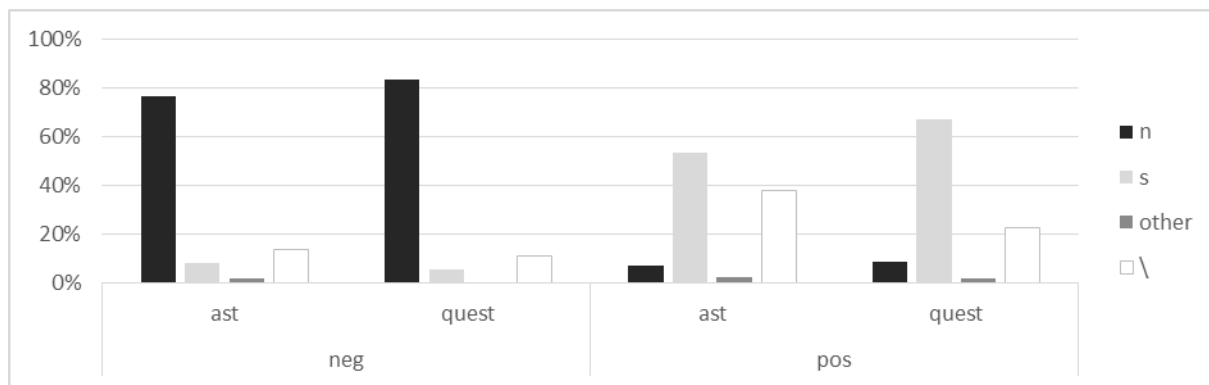
## 3.2. Non-native speakers

### 3.2.1. Particles

In this section we will discuss the results for the use of particles in negative and positive replies, among learners with a polarity oriented and an agreement oriented L1 respectively. As the two subgroups show different trends, we will treat them separately.

Figure 3 shows the use of particles for learners with polarity-oriented L1s.





**Figure 3: Non-native speakers with polarity-oriented L1s.  
Use of particles for negative confirming and positive reversing replies.**

Learners with a polarity-oriented L1 clearly incline towards the use of *sì/no* as markers of polarity, both in positive reversing and in negative confirming replies. However, when compared with NSs data, learners show a slightly higher variation in negative confirming replies, where a small percentage of *sì* is found (8 and 6%), as illustrated by ex. (17), coming from a Romanian-speaking learner:

- (17) INT: *forse non ti piaceva -, come lingua.*  
 r01: *sì. ho imparato solo: cose: # semplice.*  
 ('INT: maybe you did not like it -, as a language. r01: yes (= I didn't). I only learned simple things')

Instead, learners show a lower variation for positive reversing replies when compared to native speakers (7 and 9%). That is to say, variation in choice is low and reaches similar rates for positive and negative replies. Both results for positive and for negative replies are significantly different from native speakers' results ( $p < .01$ ). Moreover, unlike native speakers, learners do not use specific particles to overtly signal the reversing of the interlocutor's assumptions: the percentage of use of other particles is low in any of these contexts.

However, learners do not treat positive reversing and negative confirming replies in a symmetric way: indeed, within positive reversing replies, and especially in replies to assertions, particles as a whole are less used (37 and 22% of replies without particles) both when compared to negative confirming replies and to the replies of native speakers. This could be interpreted as a case of avoidance: in a pragmatically conflictual context, where disagreement needs to be marked together with a positive assessment, particles are more frequently omitted. As we have seen, particles apart from *sì* and *no* are rarely found. The repertoire for confirmation (negative replies) is slightly richer (*esatto*, 'exactly'; *certo*, 'sure'; *infatti*, 'indeed'), while for reversal (positive replies) we only found non-lexical markers. A Spanish speaker occasionally uses a dental click (ex. 18), which is used as a signal of disagreement in many languages, including Italian:

- (18) INT: *non ti piace?*  
 s01: *&ts. mi piace -, ma: la verità è che l'italiano è più: eh facile per noi -, per gli spagnoli.*  
 ('INT: don't you like it? s01: &ts. I like it -, but the truth is Italian is easier for us -, for Spanish people')

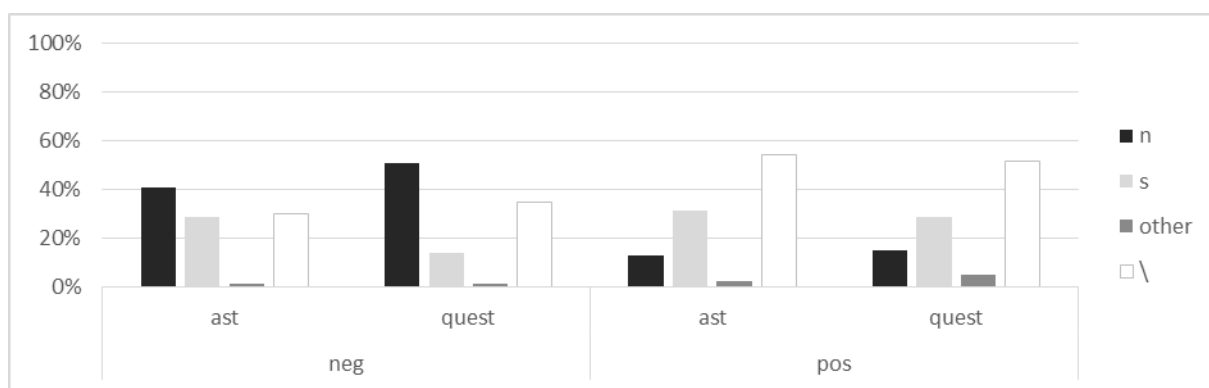
A prolonged bilabial nasal sound (ex. 19) and prolonged vocalizations (ex. 20) often occur: as they are not specific of the initial position, but work as fillers in internal positions as well, they cannot be considered as markers of polarity or agreement.<sup>12</sup>

(19) INT: *&mh non ne conosci tu.*  
 m02: *&mh: # solo # &mh professori: del # questo corso.*  
 ('INT: &mh you do not know any of them. m02: &mh # only # professors from the # this course')

(20) INT: *ma ora che sei qui a Genova -, non hai fatto qualche: viaggio:*  
 m01: *&eh: solo Venezia.*  
 INT: *&mhmh! okay. all'estero # non sei andato.*  
 ('INT: but now while you're here in Genova -, you did not go to any trip. m01: &eh only Venice.  
 \*INT: &mhmh! okay. but you did not travel abroad')

To sum up, the form of the replies to negative utterances within this group should call for a case of sociopragmatic competence in the peculiarities of such contexts, linked to a partial lack of pragmalinguistic competence in the means available in the target language for its proper management. This results in avoidance in the use of particles, especially for positive reversing replies, more marked from a conversational perspective.

Figure 4 shows the use of particles of learners with agreement-oriented L1s.



**Figure 4: Non-native speakers with agreement-oriented L1.  
 Use of particles for negative confirming and positive reversing replies.**

A partially different picture comes up for learners with an agreement-oriented L1. *Sì* and *no* are mostly used according to a polarity-oriented system among these learners as well, but a greater difficulty in use is observed. This is shown by a greater variation in the choice of *sì/no* in both positive and negative replies, when compared with both native speakers and learners with a polarity-oriented L1: interestingly, contrary to what was found for both other groups, the difference in distribution of *sì* and *no* between negative and positive replies does not reach statistical significance ( $p > .1$ ). The difficulty in use of particles is also shown

<sup>12</sup>However, it has to be observed that a bilabial nasal sound with a specific bi-tonal prosodic movement is frequently used in Italian as a marker of uptake: an instance is available at the beginning of the last turn of the Interviewer in (23).

by the high percentage of replies which do not use any particle. Particles are not used in 29 and 34% of negative confirming replies and they are even more frequently avoided within positive reversing replies (54 and 51%): this may show, once again, the avoidance of particles in a pragmatically complex context.

Apart from *sì* and *no*, the learners' repertoire is restricted to *forse*, 'maybe', and *ma*, 'but', this last used for both positive (ex. 21) and negative (ex. 22) replies. Non-lexical markers of hesitation are frequently observed among these learners as well:

(21) INT: *e adesso non è più tanto difficile stare in Italia?*

g01: *ma difficile però: # c'è # qui # [ride]*

(‘INT: and now is it no more difficult to stay here in Italy? g01: but difficult but # there is (=I am) # here [laughing]’)

(22) INT: *e # e questa però non è # la prima volta che sei venuta in Italia.*

g02: *&ah ma per: # il viaggio:: &ehm:: sono stata # quattro quattro volte quattro.*

(‘INT: and # and but this is not # the first time that you came in Italy. g02: &ah but as for the travel &ehm I have been # four four times four.’)

It has to be noticed that data within this group show great individual variation as well, depending on the speaker's L1. For instance, while non target uses among Chinese, Mongolian and Polish speakers mostly show up in the choice between *sì* and *no*, Japanese speakers more often avoid particles, especially *sì*, which never occurs as a reply to negative utterances.<sup>13</sup> The use of *sì* and *no* in accordance to an agreement-oriented system is mostly observable in negative confirming replies among Chinese and Mongolian speakers, but in positive reversing replies among Polish speakers. In order to explain such differences, a deeper investigation is needed with regard to both the L1s and the specific pragmatic conditions in which the particles occur.

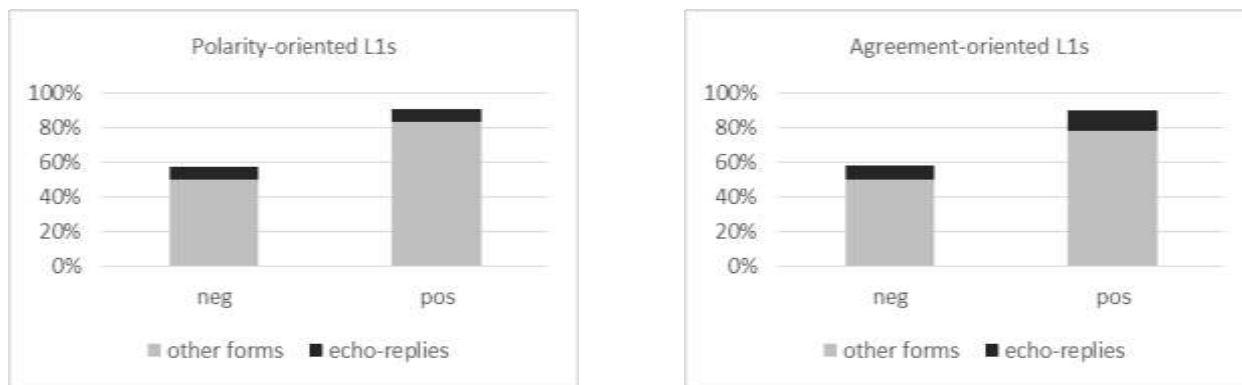
To sum up, this learners' group shows a lower pragmalinguistic competence in use of *sì/no* in both positive and negative replies and for both assertions and questions: the misleading model of the L1 turns out to play a crucial role in the use of particles. Nevertheless, the more frequent avoidance of particles observed for positive reversing replies suggests that the learners recognize their pragmatic complexity.

### 3.2.2. Expanded replies

Figures 5 and 6 show the frequency of replies including further linguistic materials for both groups of learners.

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<sup>13</sup>It occurs as an answer to positive questions.



**Figures 5-6: Non-native speakers.**

**Frequency and form of expanded replies for negative confirming and positive reversing replies.**

The two groups are similar in this respect. As is the case for native speakers, replies are in most cases not limited to the particle; the percentage of expanded replies is 57% for negative confirming replies and reaches 90% for positive reversing replies. Non-native speakers show the same tendency observed for native speakers: when they have to reverse the propositional content proposed by the interlocutor, they adopt more explicit strategies ( $p < .001$ ). Interestingly, despite their greater difficulties in managing the TL particles for both positive and negative replies, learners with an agreement-oriented language do not fall back on expanded replies as a compensative strategy more than other learners ( $p > .1$ ).

When only expanded replies are considered, the percentage of echoes is low in all learners (7 and 8%), without significant difference between negative and positive replies ( $p > .1$ ). Despite their supposed cross-linguistic availability, echo replies do not seem to be discursive resources available in a second language to compensate for partial lack in competence in the repertoire of particles.

#### **4. Discussion and concluding remarks**

The case of replies to negative questions and assertions was confirmed to be a difficult context for the use of *sì* and *no* in Italian as a second language.

This is particularly clear in the group of learners with agreement-oriented L1s, within which a clear effect of cross-linguistic influence was observed. This gives rise to a greater uncertainty in the choice between *sì* and *no*, as well as in the more frequent avoidance of particles as a whole. Learners with polarity-oriented L1s show a somewhat different trend: on the one hand, they select *sì* or *no* according to polarity values even more than native speakers do; on the other hand, they show some variation not only in positive reversing replies, as is the case for native speakers, but also in negative confirming replies. Variation in choice is also observed within native speakers, especially with positive reversing replies, but different causes have to be singled out for such variation. Among native speakers, the variation is caused by the conflict arising in positive replies between the wish to assert a positive value for the proposition at issue (through *sì*) and to explicitly mark disagreement (through *no*); among learners, variation in choice reflects a higher uncertainty

in the particle selection in both positive and negative replies, irrespective of ideational and interpersonal values at play. That is to say, learners perceive the difficulties caused by the mismatch between the particles' ideational and interpersonal values in replies to negative utterances, irrespectively of the specific contexts (confirming, reversing) they have to deal with.

Instead, a signal of a different treatment of positive reversing replies in comparison with negative confirming ones consists - in both learner groups - in an even lower use of particles in positive replies; the high degree of avoidance suggests that learners are aware of the pragmatic peculiarities of this context, but they do not have at their disposal proper lexical resources to deal with it.

Other suitable discourse markers are rarely found in both groups of learners: this finding confirms the fact that the learner's repertoire of discourse markers expands slowly in second language varieties, and at an intermediate level is still far from the richness of that possessed by native speakers. Intermediate learners are still not able to fall back on alternative strategies to cope with conflicting contexts, so should they not feel confident in the use of *sì* and *no*, they are likely to avoid discourse markers entirely.

Further interesting observations come from the analysis of the expanded replies, that is to say replies that extend beyond the particle. Expanded replies are frequent in all groups of speakers, and their percentage increases for positive replies: this is another cue to the fact that learners, as well as native speakers, are aware of the pragmatic difference between positive reversing and negative confirming replies and that they signal reversing replies more explicitly. A difference among native speakers and learners in this respect consists in the higher percentage of echo replies among native speakers: echo replies are routine constructions for native speakers, but they do not yet seem to be available to non-native speakers. This suggests that echo replies are not discursive strategies that are available cross-linguistically, but rather routines that need to be acquired.

As a whole, our results suggest that learners are equipped with sociopragmatic competence in disentangling conversational contexts where a marked pragmatic function (disagreement) must be carried out. This ability is not linked to previous linguistic knowledge, but rather comes from previous experience in conversational settings. However, their limited repertoire of TL pragmalinguistic resources (both in terms of discourse markers and routine constructions, such as echo replies) is not sufficient to deal with such a conversationally marked context. As a result, learners may avoid the use of particles as a whole in favour of discursive resources, explicitly verbalizing the intended meaning through complete sentential constructions. Instead, when *sì* and *no* are used, cross-linguistic influence arises with the clear effect of polarization towards polarity values (for learners with polarity-oriented L1s) or major variation among polarity and agreement values (for learners with agreement-oriented L1s).

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## Résumé

*Les particules oui/non assurent la cohésion discursive et facilitent l'énonciation en contexte interactionnel dès les niveaux initiaux de l'acquisition d'une L2 (Perdue 1993; Bernini 1996, 2000; Andorno 2008a pour l'italien L2), mais des difficultés d'usage peuvent ressortir pour les réponses à des énoncés négatifs tels que "Tu n'as pas eu la nouvelle?". Dans ce cas, le locuteur doit choisir entre l'une des deux fonctions en conflit encodées par la particule: ou bien l'idéationnelle (signaler la polarité positive ou négative de la proposition*

*en discussion), ou bien l'interpersonnelle (confirmer ou renverser la polarité négative attribuée par l'interlocuteur). Dès Pope (1973), une distinction a été tracée entre les langues avec des particules de polarité, telle que l'anglais (yes/no), et les langues avec des particules d'accord, tel que le Japonais (hai/iie). L'étude compare l'usage des particules si/no et d'autres routines - telles que les constructions en écho - dans les réponses en italien langue maternelle et L2, chez des apprenants ayant l'un ou l'autre système de particules dans leur langue maternelle. Les résultats confirment un effet d'influence translinguistique déjà observé dans d'autres domaines de la compétence pragmatique (Gass & Selinker 1992, Kasper 1992, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2008), mais ils montrent également que, malgré le manque de compétence au niveau pragmatolinguistique, les apprenants ont la même sensibilité sociopragmatique que des locuteurs natifs pour gérer les spécificités pragmatiques des réponses aux énoncés négatifs.*