

# Polarity particles in interrogative tags\*

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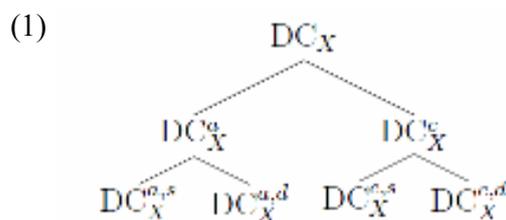


“Grazie di tutto, Adriana!”

## 1. Particle tag questions in Italian

Most generally, a tag question is a discourse move effected by means of a sentence with declarative syntax (henceforth, the *anchor*) immediately followed by a fragment with interrogative intonation (henceforth, the *tag*). These tags belong in a small class including predicates translating *true* or *right*, their negated counterparts, and responding particles (the equivalents of *yes* and *no*).

I will follow Farkas and Roelofsen (2012) and borrow their notion of the discourse commitment set of a speaker  $X$ ,  $DC_X$ . While CG (the common ground) includes the propositions that have been jointly committed to by all the discourse participants,  $DC_X$  includes the propositions that the speaker  $X$  has committed to. In the most refined typology,  $DC_X$  is further subdivided with respect to two dichotomies: (a) whether they are *actual* or *conditional*; (b) whether the speaker presents herself as having epistemic authority over her assertion (she presents herself as a *source*) or not (she presents herself as a *dependent*):



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Italian exploits a number of invariant tags. The most relevant contrast is between *no?* and *si?*. Imagine a context in which the speaker is not in a position to assert that *p*, while the addressee can:

- (2) [The addressee is eating ice-cream, the speaker is not.]
- a. #È buono, no?  
is-it good no
  - b. È buono, sì?  
is-it good yes

All other things being, (2a) is unacceptable, while (2b) is just fine.

For a tag question whose propositional content is *p*, one can formulate the discourse effect of *no?* and *si?* as in (8) and (9), respectively:

- (3) Add *p* to  $DC_X^{c,s}$ .  
 (4) Add *p* to  $DC_X^{c,d}$ .

By means of tag questions with *no?* and *si?*, the speaker express a conditional commitment to *p*. With *no?*, the speaker presents herself as a source for the commitment, and invites the addressee to express herself as a source herself. With *si?*, the speaker presents herself as dependent on the addressee's commitment as source, i.e., as not being in a good epistemic position to justify the commitment.

Syntactic diagnostics give hints about the structure of particle tag questions and reveal that the anchor does not c-command the tags. Very roughly, then, the syntactic structure of particle tag questions must conform to the following:

- (5) [<sub>XP</sub> [<sub>YP</sub> ANCHOR ] *no?* ]

## 2. Disjunctive tags

Disjunctive tag questions divide into two subclasses. Nuclear disjunctive tag questions (NDTQ) have falling intonation on the anchor, an intonational break and rising intonation on the disjunctive tag. As mentioned above, disjunctive tags must have opposite polarity with respect to their anchors:

- (6) a. Magda viene a cena, o no?  
Magda comes to dinner or no  
Lit. 'Magda is coming to dinner, or no?'
- (7) b. Magda non viene a cena, o sì?  
Magda not comes to dinner or yes  
Lit. 'Magda is not coming to dinner, or yes?'

The discourse properties of NDTQ seem to be close to the *no?*-type. NDTQs are unacceptable in a scenario in which the speaker has low epistemic authority on the matter:

- (8) [The addressee is eating ice-cream, the speaker is not.]  
 a. #È buono, o no?  
     is-it good or no  
 b. #Non è cattivo, o sì?  
     not is-it bad or yes

The discourse effect of NDTQs shall then be formalized as above:

- (9) Add  $p$  to  $DC_X^{c,s}$ .

Postnuclear disjunctive tag questions (PNDTQs) have a rising intonation on the anchor, with a peak on the last tonic syllable, and a second rise on the particle, the intonational break is perceptually less prominent:

- (10)           Magda viene a cena o no?  
           Magda comes to dinner or no  
           ‘Magda is coming to dinner or not?’

In our stock contexts, PDTQs diverge from NDTQs:

- (11)           [Both the speaker and the addressee are eating ice-cream.]  
           a. È buono o no?  
               is-it good or no
- (12)           [The addressee is eating ice-cream, the speaker is not.]  
           a. È buono o no?  
               is-it good or no

I will argue in favour of an analysis of PDTQs as unbiased alternative questions on polarity.

As for the syntax of NDTQs and PNDTQs. I will propose that they are the result of two different kinds of disjunctive coordination, respectively at the level of speech acts and at clausal level, with ellipsis of the second disjunct.

## References

- Farkas, D. and Roelofsen F. (2012) Polar initiatives and polarity particles in an inquisitive discourse model. Unpublished manuscript.