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Negative Questions in Japanese

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井上 優：日本語の否定疑問文

Abstract: In the Japanese language, yes-no questions of the form *P NAI KA?* are often used as “possibility-evoking questions” (PEQs), i.e., one type of yes-no question which reintroduces a possibility of P into contexts where the possibility of P has been negated.

Previous linguists have analyzed PEQs *P NAI KA?* as questions which ask about the truth value of a proposition Not-P, and have claimed that the interpretation of “anticipation of positive answer” of PEQs is derived from Hudson’s (1978) pragmatic principle of “negative conduciveness”. Based on the use of the adverbs *Hontoo-wa* and *Hontoo-ni*, I demonstrate that PEQs *P NAI KA?* are questions about whether or not a proposition P is true rather than questions about a proposition Not-P.

I further argue that PEQs, like negative conditionals *P NAK-EREBA* with the meaning of ‘unless P’, present a *necessary* hypothesis P, i.e., a possibility of P which is *necessary* to hypothesize even though it conflicts with assumptions established in the preceding context.

Key words: yes-no question, negative question, negative conduciveness, possibility evoking

要旨: 日本語では、「Pナイカ」の形式の真偽疑問文がしばしば「可能性喚起の疑問文」、すなわち文脈上否定されている可能性を文脈に再導入するタイプの真偽疑問文として用いられる。

従来、可能性喚起の疑問文「Pナイカ」は「Pでない」の真偽を問題にする疑問文として分析され、その「肯定の答えを予想する」という意味も Hudson (1978) のいう *negative conduciveness* という観点から説明されてきた。しかし、本論では、副詞「本当は」「本当に」の使われ方にもとづき、可能性喚起の疑問文「Pナイカ」はあくまで命題Pの真偽を問題にする疑問文であることを主張する。

そして、可能性喚起の疑問文は、必要条件を表す否定条件文「Pナケレバ」と同じく、Pの可能性を「文脈と対立するが想定することが必要な」可能性として提示する文であると主張する。

キーワード: 真偽疑問文, 否定疑問文, *negative conduciveness*, 可能性喚起

In this paper, I will discuss a semantic and pragmatic function of a particular type of negative question which I call “possibility-evoking question”.

1. Two types of yes-no questions

Yes-no questions (YNQs) are divided into two types; genuine yes-no questions and possibility-evoking questions (PEQs).

Genuine YNQs are questions which ask about the truth value of positive or negative propositions. The questions in (1) are examples of genuine positive questions *P ka?* (where P stands for a positive proposition.)

(1) 何か食べるか? / 何か食べるのか?

Nanika taberu ka? / Nanika taberu no ka?

‘Will you eat something? / Is it that you will eat something?’

The questions in (2) are examples of genuine negative questions *Not-P ka?*.

(2) 何も食べないか? / 何も食べないのか?

Nanimo tabe-nai ka? / Nanimo tabe-nai no ka?

‘Will you not eat anything? / Is it that you won’t eat anything?’

In contrast, PEQs are questions with the meaning of a reserved proposal, that is, questions which get the hearer to recognize the possibility presented in the question.

Syntactically, PEQs contain the negative element *nai*, but semantically speaking, the negative *nai* and the question marker *ka*

combine into an independent modal expression which expresses a reserved proposal. In the examples of PEQs in this paper, I will indicate the negative element *nai* and the question marker *ka* with capital letters.

The examples in (3) through (6) are positive PEQs which express a positive proposal. They have the form *P NAI KA?*

(3) is an example of a PEQ which expresses a reserved invitation.

(3) 何か食べないか？

Nanika tabe-NAI KA?

‘Won’t you eat something?’

(4) is an example where a PEQ is used in a reserved request.

(4) すみませんが、これを英語に訳してもらえませんか？

Sumimasen ga, kore o eigo ni yakusite morae-MASEN KA?

‘Can’t I have you translate this manuscript into English?’

(5a) and (5b) are examples of PEQs which express a supposition.

(5) Cashier : 合計で6800円になります。

Gookee de 6800-en ni narimasu.

‘The total comes to ¥6,800.’

Customer : a . え？その計算、間違っていないですか？

E? Sono keesan matigatte i-MASEN KA?

‘What? Isn’t that calculation wrong?’

b . え？その計算、間違っているんじゃないですか？

E? Sono keesan matigatte iru n zya NAI desu KA?

‘What? Isn’t it that your calculation is wrong?’

(6) is an example of the use of a PEQ to express the speaker's wish.

(6) 早く桜の花が咲かないかなあ。(Wish)

Hayaku sakura no hana ga saka-NAI KA naa.

'I wonder if the cherry blossoms won't bloom soon (by any chance).
(lit.)'

Kuno (1973:280) refers to positive PEQs like those in (3) through (6) as "negative questions with anticipation of a positive answer" and Nitta (1990:149) refers to PEQs as "negative questions with a positive bias". I will demonstrate that positive PEQs are questions which ask whether or not a positive proposition is true rather than questions about a negative proposition.

(7) is an example of a negative PEQ of the form *Not-P NAI KA?*.

(7) まだ桜の花は咲いていないんじゃないか？

Mada sakura no hana wa saite i-nai n zya NAI KA?

'Isn't it that the cherry blossoms have not bloomed yet?'

In (7), the speaker presents a negative supposition and asks whether it is true.

In this paper, I will focus primarily on positive PEQs like those in (3) through (6) in order to simplify my discussion. So, whenever I say "possibility-evoking question", I will be referring to positive PEQs.

In my discussion, I will address the question of why it is that the combination of the negative and the question marker is interpreted as a reserved proposal or possibility-evoking.

I will start with my arguments for why previous explanations of

PEQs are not adequate in section 2, and then I will propose a new analysis in section 3 and 4.

2. Genuine negative questions vs. Possibility-evoking questions

Based on a comparison of genuine negative questions and PEQs, I will demonstrate that PEQs, that is, positive PEQs, are questions which ask about the truth value of positive propositions and are not a subclass of genuine negative questions as has been claimed previously.

Previous linguists have analyzed PEQs as a subclass of genuine negative questions. They claim that the fact that PEQs anticipate a positive answer is simply a pragmatic implication of genuine negative questions.

For example, Nakada (1980) derives the interpretation of “anticipation of positive answer” from Hudson’s (1978) pragmatic principle of “negative conduciveness”.

According to Hudson, negatively conducive questions are questions which anticipate disagreements, that is, questions which give the addressee the impression that the questioner expects the addressee to say “yes”, although the questioner him/herself thinks that the answer should or could be “no”. In other words, the speaker expresses doubt about the truth of P/Not-P by calling P/Not-P into question and in doing so implies that s/he expects its negation, namely Not-P/P.

Nakada applies this notion of “negative conduciveness” to the meaning of PEQs as shown in (8).

- (8) Applying this line of argument (based on “negative conduciveness”) to...sentences like “Tabe-mase-n-ka ‘Aren’t you going to eat?’” we may say that a speaker of this negatively conducive sentence antici-

pates disagreement with the negativity in it: i.e., he anticipates or presupposes an affirmative answer. (Nakada 1980:127)

According to Nakada, when a speaker says *Tabemasenka* ‘Won’t you eat?’, s/he expects the addressee to say “I won’t eat”, although the speaker thinks the answer should or could be “I will eat”.

I disagree with Nakada’s explanation.

My justification is based on the use of *hontoo wa* and *hontoo ni* with genuine YNQs and PEQs. The examples in (9) and (10) show that PEQs *PAI KA?* are questions about whether or not a positive proposition P is true rather than questions about a negative proposition Not-P.

(9) is an example of a genuine negative question.

- (9) さっきは [寒い] と言っていたけど、ひょっとして本当は [寒くない] のか?

Sakki wa {samui} to itte ita kedo, hyottosite hontoo wa {samukunai} no ka?

‘You just said that you were cold, but is it that you really aren’t cold?’

(10a) and (10b) are examples of a PEQ.

- (10) a. [寒くない] ようなふりをしているけど、本当は [寒く] ないか?
{Samuku-nai} yoonafuri o site iru kedo, hontoo wa {samuku}-
NAI KA?

‘You are pretending to look like you are not cold, but aren’t you really cold?’

- b. [寒くない] ようなふりをしているけど、本当は [寒い] んじゃないか?

{Samuku-nai} yoona furi o site iru kedo, hontoo wa {samui} n zya
NAI KA?

'You are pretending to look like you are not cold, but aren't you
really cold?'

The questions in (9) and (10) contain the adverb *hontoo wa* 'The fact of the matter is'. The adverb *hontoo wa* indicates that the information conveyed by the sentence is a fact which has been hidden or negated. YNQs with the adverb *hontoo wa* ask about the truth value of a proposition that is contrary to the information asserted or implied in the preceding context.

In the genuine negative question in (9), the speaker supposes that the hearer is not cold contrary to what the hearer has said previously. The speaker asks whether or not his negative supposition is true.

In contrast, the PEQs in (10) are used in contexts where the speaker supposes that the hearer is cold in spite of his appearance and intends to ask whether this positive supposition is true.

When the speaker uses a genuine negative question instead of the PEQ in the context in (10), the question is interpreted with the adverb *hontoo ni* 'really' as shown in (11a).

(11) a. [寒くない] ようなふりをしているけど, 本当に [寒くない] のか?
{Samuku-nai} yoona furi o site iru kedo, hontoo ni {samuku-
nai} no ka?

'You are pretending to look like you are not cold, but is it that you
aren't really cold?'

YNQs with the adverb hontoo ni are questions which ask about the

truth value of information that has been asserted or implied in the preceding context. As shown below, *hontoo wa* is impossible in the context in (11).

- (11) b. ?? [寒くない] ようなふりをしているけど、本当は [寒くない] のか？
??[Samuku-nai] yoona furi o site iru kedo, hontoo wa {samuku-nai} no ka?
'You are pretending to look like you are not cold, but aren't you really cold?'

This fact indicates that PEQs *P NAI KA?* are questions which ask about the truth value of a positive proposition *P*, and are not the subclass of genuine negative questions. Moreover, this means that the interpretation of PEQs as reserved proposals is not derived from "negative conduciveness".

3. The basic function of possibility-evoking questions

Next, I will demonstrate that the basic function of PEQs *P NAI KA?* is reintroduction of a possibility.

Although both PEQs and positive questions ask about whether or not a positive proposition is true, they are used in different contexts.

Positive questions of the form *P ka?* 'Is *P* true?' are used in contexts where it is possible to hypothesize that *P* is true, without conflicting with any assumptions established in the preceding context. Example (12) shows that it is not possible to use a positive question if a proposition *P* has been negated in the preceding context.

- (12) 1 A : この部屋少し [寒い] か？

- Kono heya sukosi {samui} ka?
 ‘Is this room a little cold?’
- 2 B : いや, そんなに [寒くない] よ。
 Iya, sonna ni {samuku-nai} yo.
 ‘No, I don’t feel that cold, you know.’
- 3 A : a . そんなこと言って, 本当は [寒く] ないか?
 Sonna koto itte, hontoo wa {samuku}-NAI KA?
 ‘You say so, (but) really, isn’t it that you are cold?’
- b . そんなこと言って, 本当は [寒い] んじゃないか?
 Sonna koto itte, hontoo wa {samui} n zya NAI KA?
 ‘You say so, (but) really, isn’t it that you are cold?’

The speaker A is asking whether or not B feels cold. The speaker B has negated the possibility of B being cold. In this context, the speaker A, who supposes that B is cold contrary to the preceding statement in (12-2B), must use PEQs to ask whether or not his belief “B is cold” is true, as shown in the (a) and (b) sentences.

The genuine positive question (c) is impossible in this context.

- (12) 1 A : この部屋少し [寒い] か?
 Kono heya sukosi {samui} ka?
 ‘Is this room a little cold?’
- 2 B : いや, そんなに [寒くない] よ。
 Iya, sonna ni {samuku-nai} yo.
 ‘No, I don’t feel that cold, you know.’
- 3 A : c . ??そんなこと言って, 本当は [寒い] か?
 ??Sonna koto itte, hontoo wa {samui} ka?
 ‘You say so, but are you really cold?’

The PEQs in (12-3Aa, b) express the questioner A's attitude that it is *necessary* to hypothesize that B is cold even though this hypothesis conflicts with the B's preceding statement. By expressing this attitude, the questioner reintroduces the possibility of B being cold into the context and asks whether or not it is true.

I have given similar examples in (13) and (14). In (13), the questioner must use a PEQs to ask whether or not his belief which conflicts with the hearer's appearance is true.

(13) [Although the speaker feels very cold, the hearer who is wearing only a T-shirt does not appear to feel cold.]

a. そんな格好だと [寒く] ないか?

Sonna kakkoo da to [samuku]-NAI KA?

'Aren't you cold in those clothes?'

The genuine positive question (b) is impossible in this context.

(13) b. ??そんな格好だと [寒い] か?

??Sonna kakkoo da to [samui] ka?

'Are you cold in those clothes?'

Because the proposition P "being cold" is negated by the addressee's appearance of not being cold, the speaker must use a PEQ *P NAI KA?* 'Isn't P true?' to ask whether his positive belief is true.

(14) is a context where the speaker asks whether or not his/her belief which conflicts with the hearer's recognition is true. In this case, too, the speaker must use PEQs to confirm the truth of his/her supposition. The genuine positive question is impossible.

(14) Cashier : 合計で 6800 円になります。

Gooke de 6800-en ni narimasu.

'The total comes to ¥6,800.'

Customer : a . え？その計算，[間違ってい] ませんか？

E? Sono keesan (matigatte i)-MASEN KA?

'What? Isn't that calculation wrong?'

b . え？その計算，[間違っている] んじゃないですか？

E? Sono keesan (matigatte iru) n zya NAI desu KA?

'What? Isn't it that your calculation is wrong?'

c . ??え？その計算，[間違っています] か？

??E? Sono keesan (matigatte imasu) ka?

'What? Is that calculation wrong?'

Because the possibility P “the calculation is wrong” is negated by the fact that the cashier does not notice that it is wrong, the customer must use a PEQ *P NAI KA?* ‘Isn't P true?’ to ask whether the positive supposition is true.

The frequency and range of use of PEQs in Japanese is very broad. In other words, the function of possibility reintroduction is maximally utilized in Japanese.

(15) is an example of the use of PEQ for a reserved invitation.

(15) 家にいいお酒があるんだけど，飲みに来ないか？

(Reserved Invitation)

Ie ni ii osake ga aru n da kedo, nomi ni ko-NAI KA?

'It's that there is a good wine at home, but won't you come to drink (it)?'

In invitations with PEQs, the speaker calls the hearer's attention to a new possibility which has been unknown to the hearer up until the speech time. The PEQ (15) expresses that the speaker realizes that it is an unexpected question for the hearer. The questioner's consideration for the hearer makes the invitation a reserved invitation.

(16) is an example of the use of a PEQ for a reserved request.

(16) すみませんが、これを英語に訳してもらえませんか？

(Reserved request)

Sumimasen ga, kore o eigo ni yakusite morae-MASEN KA?

'Can't I have you translate this manuscript into English?'

The PEQ in (16) is a reserved request because it indicates that the speaker assumes that his/her request may not be accepted because it will give the hearer some trouble.

(17) is an example of the use of a PEQ which expresses the speaker's wish.

(17) 早く桜の花が咲かないかなあ。(Wish)

Hayaku sakura no hana ga saka-NAI KA naa.

'I wonder if the cherry blossoms won't bloom soon (by any chance).

(lit.)'

(17) is used in a context where the speaker wishes the cherry blossoms would bloom soon, even though the speaker's wish is unlikely to be realized.

Example (18) is a typical use of PEQs in the beginning of letters.

(18) 寒い日が続いていますが、風邪などひいていませんか？

Samui hi ga tuzuite imasu ga, kaze nado hiite i-MASEN KA?

‘There continue to be cold days, but do you not (by any chance) have a cold?. (lit.)’

In order to understand this context, it is necessary to consider the situation from the point of view of Japanese culture. On the one hand, the writer of the letter believes that the receiver is likely to have a cold given the cold weather. However, the writer, on the other hand, also believes that the receiver would not say that she has a cold of her own accord. Because P “having a cold” is negated because the writer does not believe the receiver of the letter should say she has a cold, the writer must use a PEQ *P NAI KA?* ‘Isn’t P true?’ to ask whether the positive belief of having a cold is true.

The examples of PEQs in (12) through (18) are all used to ask about the truth value of propositions which conflict with the assumptions established in the preceding contexts. The PEQs have the pragmatic effect of reintroducing the possibility which has been excluded from the context, and this effect provides the essence of what previous linguists have referred to as “anticipation of a positive answer” or “positive bias”.

4. Possibility-evoking questions and negative conditionals

Next, I will demonstrate that the function of PEQs is similar to that of negative conditionals with the meaning of ‘unless’.

Bolinger’s (1978) claim in (19) that YNQs are semantically very similar to conditionals has relevance to my analysis of PEQs.

(19) Both conditionals and YNQs [yes-no questions] are hypotheses. A

condition hypothesizes that something is true and draws a conclusion from it. And a YNQ hypothesizes that something is true and confirmed, amended, or disconfirmed by an interlocuter. (Bolinger 1979:102)

The contrast between positive conditionals and negative conditionals with the meaning of ‘unless’ is parallel to that of genuine positive questions and PEQs.

(20) is an example of a positive conditional.

(20) [80点とれ] ば [合格できる]。

[80-ten tore] ba, [gookaku dekiru].

‘(You) can pass the exam if (you) get 80 points.’

In (20), the speaker states that “getting 80 points” is a sufficient condition for “passing”. (20) would be used in a situation where a teacher is reassuring some students who think that a passing grade is higher than an 80, for example 90, by telling them that a passing grade is lower than they expect.

In the situation where the speaker uses (20), 80 points is presented as a sufficient condition because it doesn’t conflict with the hearer’s assumption that 90 is a passing grade as shown in (21).

(21) If an 80 is passing, then a 90, i.e., what the hearer assumes is a passing grade, is also passing.

In (22), the speaker states that “getting 80 points” is a necessary or indispensable condition for “passing”.

(22) [80点とら] なければ [合格でき] ない。

[80-ten tora]-nakereba, [gookaku deki]-nai.

‘(You) can’t pass the exam unless (you) get 80 points.’

(22) would be used in a situation where a teacher is warning some students who think that a passing grade is less than 80, for example 70, that a passing grade is higher than they expect.

In the situation where the speaker uses (22), 80 points is presented as a necessary condition because it conflicts with the hearer’s assumption that a 70 is a passing grade as shown in (23).

(23) If an 80 is the lowest passing grade, then a 70, i.e., what the hearer assumes is a passing grade, is not passing.

Thus, the introduction of a necessary condition with a negative conditional has the pragmatic effect of reintroducing a hypothesis which conflicts with the assumptions established in the preceding context.

We can apply this line of argument to genuine positive questions and PEQs.

(24) is a genuine positive question.

(24) ひょっとして私の計算 [間違っていました] か?

Hyottosite watasi no keesan [matigatte imasita] ka?

‘Was my calculation wrong by any chance?’

I have given the meaning of the question in (24) in (25).

(25) The meaning of (24):

In this context, it is *possible* to hypothesize that my calculation was

wrong, without any conflicts with the context. Is this hypothesis true or not?

In contrast, one utters the PEQ in (26), when s/he wants to get the hearer to recognize the possibility that the hearer has made an error, in a situation where it is assumed that the hearer has not recognized this possibility.

- (26) ひょっとして、あなたの計算 [間違っ*て*い] ませんか？
Hyottosite anata no keesan {matigatte i}-MASEN KA?
'Isn't your calculation possibly wrong?'

I have given the meaning of the question in (26) in (27).

- (27) The meaning of (26):

In this context, it is *necessary* to hypothesize that your calculation is wrong, even though this hypothesis conflicts with your assumptions. Is this hypothesis true or not?

Thus, genuine positive questions, like positive conditionals, present a *possible* positive hypothesis, namely, a proposition which is sufficiently possible to hypothesize without conflicting with any assumptions established in the preceding context.

In contrast, PEQs, like negative conditionals with the meaning of 'unless', present a *necessary* positive hypothesis, namely, a proposition that is *necessary* to hypothesize even though it conflicts with assumptions established in the preceding context.

The function of presenting a *necessary* hypothesis has the pragmatic

effect of reintroducing the possibility which has been excluded from the context.

The negative element in PEQs turns a possible hypothesis into a necessary one without altering the polarity of the hypothesis itself. This is why PEQs ask about whether or not a positive proposition is true even though they contain a negative element.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, PEQs *P NAI KA?* are questions which ask about the truth value of the proposition P and are not a subclass of genuine negative questions as previous linguists have claimed.

The basic function of PEQs is reintroduction of possibility.

PEQs *P NAI KA?* are used to introduce a hypothesis of P being true as a *necessary* hypothesis into contexts in situations where the possibility of P has been negated in the preceding context.

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