Yep, indeed: The certainty of polarity particles *yep* and *nope*

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The present paper proposes a semantic account of the distribution of *yep* and *nope*, which overlaps with that of *yes* and *no*, but is shown to be more restricted. First, *yep* is only felicitous in response to a positive initiative (1). Second, unlike *yes*, *yep* cannot be used to disagree with a preceding utterance, regardless of its polarity (1). Third, in contrast to *no*, *nope* cannot be used to disagree with a preceding negative utterance (2). Finally, both *yep* and *nope* are only felicitous in response to an utterance previously made salient in the discourse, and not in response to out-of-the-blue utterances (3). Both particles are used to emphasize the speaker's certainty that the propositional content associated with their response should be included in the common ground (CG). The analysis combines a featural, anaphoric treatment of polarity particles with the discourse management operator VERUM (presented below).

(1) a. Amy didn't leave.   b. Yes, she did./#Yep, she did./Yes, she didn't./#Yep, she didn't.
(2) a. Amy didn't leave.   b. No, she did./#Nope, she did.
(3) a. I just got tickets to *Hamilton* – do you want to come?   b. Yes./#Yep./No./#Nope.

It has been proposed that polarity particles are anaphoric to a propositional antecedent (e.g., Krifka 2013; Farkas & Roelofsen, 2015). This captures the fact that polarity particles such as *yes* and *no* are felicitous only in response to an utterance. In order to account for the further requirement on *yep* and *nope* that their antecedent be given in the discourse, the current proposal adopts the discourse model of Farkas & Bruce (2009), which itself builds on classic works on discourse structure (e.g., Stalnaker 1978). Making an assertion or uttering a polar question puts a syntactic and semantic object on the Table and projects possible future common grounds which would resolve the issue raised. These speech acts function, respectively, as proposals or requests to increase the CG. A side effect of any speech act is that it automatically adds to the common ground the proposition that the speech act has occurred. The present paper argues that only if a speech act is recorded in the CG in this way can the propositional content of the speech act serve as an antecedent to *yep/nope*. Otherwise, default *yes/no* must be chosen by the speaker.

Polarity particles have been treated as spelling out combinations of absolute and relative polarity features. Absolute features determine the polarity of an utterance, while relative features have a discursive function of either agreeing or disagreeing with the preceding utterance (e.g., Pope, 1976; Farkas & Roelofsen, 2015). A featural account of *yep* and *nope* helps explain the properties illustrated by (1) and (2) above. Whereas *yes* can realize either an absolute positive feature or a relative agreement feature, *yep* is felicitous only in a response which involves both positive polarity and agreement. *Nope* is felicitous as a negative response, realizing only the absolute negative feature. In order to capture the emphatic nature of *yep* and *nope*, I introduce a VERUM operator (e.g., Höhle, 1992; Romero & Han, 2004; Gutzmann & Miró, 2011; Romero, 2014). The polarity particles occur as complements of the VERUM operator. VERUM makes the interpretive contribution that the speaker has full certainty that the propositional antecedent of the particle should be included in the common ground.

This work presents a novel English data pattern, contributes to the existing literature on the semantics of polarity particles and interrogatives, and provides evidence for the existence of an unstudied manifestation of VERUM focus. In addition, the data and analysis provide support for ambiguities involving high negation in polar questions, as discussed by Romero & Han (2004).

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