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The role of (historical) pragmatics in the use of response particles: the case of French

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Abstract

This paper studies the synchronic uses and diachronic evolution of a small set of so-called “response particles” in French, viz. the contemporary forms *oui* (‘yes’), *si* (‘yes’), and *non* (‘no’), and their historical sources, as well as a by now largely obsolete fourth particle *nenni* (‘no’). Among current models of response particle usage, the leading syntactic model is argued to be fundamentally flawed, while the leading semantic model reveals itself incapable of providing an empirically accurate account of the present-day uses of the French particles. Instead, (historical) pragmatics is shown to constitute an indispensable component of such an account. This is hypothesized to be true not just for French, but across languages. In addition, analysis of the French data throws (further) doubt on the explanatory power of the concept of synchronic functional paradigms.

1 Introduction

This paper studies the synchronic uses and diachronic evolution of a small set of so-called “response particles” in French, viz. the contemporary forms *oui* (‘yes’), *si* (‘yes’), and *non* (‘no’), and their historical sources, as well as a by now largely obsolete fourth particle *nenni* (‘no’).

Although response particles hardly constitute a vast field of linguistic enquiry, they have been the object of some recent interest. Prominently, two models, one syntactic (Holmberg 2016) and one semantic (Roelofsen & Farkas 2015), have been proposed to account for their usage across the languages of the world. It will be shown, however, that both these models encounter problems of a conceptual and/or an empirical nature. On the basis of French as the case study, (historical) pragmatics is argued to be, in fact, the key to an empirically adequate description of response particles.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 defines the notion of response particles. Section 3 describes the two dominant systems of response-particle usage in the world’s languages, and critically discusses the two models mentioned above. Section 4 looks more closely at the distribution and functions of response particles in Modern and Contemporary French, and shows that Roelofsen & Farkas’ model cannot, in fact, handle authentic corpus data from that language. Section 5 traces the diachronic evolution of the particles *oui*, *non*, *si*, and *nenni* in French, based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of more than 3,000 tokens dating from the 12th through to the 21st century. Section 6 is a conclusion.

2 Response particles: a general overview

Many languages possess one or more particles whose principal function is that of responding to a previous utterance, by assessing that utterance for adequacy in ways which will be made more precise below. Accordingly, such items will be referred to as “response particles” in this paper.

In English, the relevant forms are the words *yes* and *no*. These items are perhaps most saliently used to respond to a polar interrogative produced by a previous speaker. However, in English as in many other languages, they can in fact respond to any of the four main sentence types, although they may in some cases be most natural if accompanied by additional linguistic material, as seen in (1)-(4):

- (1) [Polar interrogative] A. Did John leave? – B. Yes./No.
- (2) [Declarative] A. Brexit will be a disaster. – B. Yes./No(, it won't).
- (3) [Imperative] A. Clean your room! – B. Yes(, alright.)/No.
- (4) [Exclamative] A. What a gorgeous dress! – B. Yes./No(, I don't like it).

The default context of occurrence of response particles is thus direct speech in dialogue. Response particles can be found in monological contexts, but in such cases, the discourse is typically dialogic in structure (Roulet et al. 1987: 60), i.e. the speaker or writer is acting out both sides of a (typically imaginary) dialogue, possibly with him-/herself, as in (5) below:

- (5) Would they really do this to us? No, surely not!

Response particles may also be used as emphatic devices in monologic discourse (i.e. discourse in which only a single voice is represented, cf. Roulet et al. 1987: 60), as in (6)-(7). That type of use, which is arguably derived from their more central dialogic uses, will not be discussed further in this paper:

- (6) Oh, that's a nice one, yes yes, a very nice one!
- (7) This is not good, no, not at all good.

In addition, at least some languages allow response particles to be embedded, as seen in the French example in (8). Like the monologic uses, however, embedded uses lie outside the purview of the present study:

- (8) J'ai demandé à Pierre s'il viendrait, et il m'a assuré *que* oui.
'I asked Pierre if he was coming, and he assured me *that* he was.' [lit.: '...he assured me that yes.']

Although the function of responding to another speaker's preceding utterance is self-evidently a language universal, not all natural languages have dedicated response particles like *yes* and *no* in their grammatical inventory (Sadock & Zwicky 1985: 109; König & Siemund 2007: 321): thus, for instance, while not just French, but all the major modern Romance languages possess such items, their mother language, Latin, did not. Languages without response particles are therefore obliged to express the meanings conveyed by such items by other means. Even in languages like English or French, alternative means of

expression are not infrequently used, and may, indeed, tend to complement the response particles in some contexts.

Saliently, languages may make use of “echo responses” (Sadock & Zwicky 1985: 191; König & Siemund 2007: 321), i.e. anaphoric elliptical clauses of the type seen in (9):

- (9) A. Did John leave? B. He did. (= yes)/He didn't. (= no)

Alternatively (or indeed, alongside echo responses), they may use various types of non-clausal items, incl. particles, whose primary function is not that of responding to a previous utterance, but which, when used in that type of context, will convey the meaning of a *yes* or a *no*, along with possible further elements of meaning, cf. (10)-(11):

- (10) A. Did John leave? – B. Certainly. (> yes)/Alas! (> yes or no, depending on context)/If only... (> no)
(11) A. Clean your room! – B. Okay. (> yes)/Eff off! (> no)

3 The two basic systems of response particle usage

Typological studies (Sadock & Zwicky 1985: 189-190; König & Siemund 2007: 320f; Holmberg 2016: ch. 4) have shown that there are two basic systems governing the use of response particles in those languages that have them.

One type of system, which according to Holmberg (2016: 145) is common in Indo-European languages, is a “Yes/No-“ or “Polarity-based” system. In this type of system, the particles express the positive or negative polarity of the response, independently of the polarity of the utterance that is being responded to. Using P and N as shorthands for positive vs negative particles, respectively, the distribution of particles in such a system is illustrated in (12)-(13):

- (12) A. Did John leave? – B. P. (= John left.)/N. (= John didn't leave.)
(13) A. Did John not leave? – B. P. (= John left.)/N. (= John didn't leave.)

The second type of system is variously called “(Dis)agreement-“ or “Truth-based”. This system appears to be the most common one in languages spoken to the east of India (Holmberg 2016: 149). Here, the particles express ratification (P) vs non-ratification (N) of the polarity of the utterance that is being responded to. They will thus be distributed as seen in (14)-(15):

- (14) A. Did John leave? – B. P. (= John left.)/N. (=John didn't leave.)
(15) A. Did John not leave? – B. P. (= John didn't leave.)/N. (= John left.)

Comparing (12)-(13) with (14)-(15), we see that the two systems have the same outcome if the preceding utterance has positive polarity, but that the outcomes differ when that utterance has negative polarity.

Different theoretical models have been proposed to account for these two systems of response particle usage, the principal ones being Holmberg's (2016) syntactic account vs Roelofsen & Farkas' (2015) semantic account.

3.1 Holmberg (2016): the use of response particles is syntactically determined

For Holmberg (2016: ch. 3), response particles are sentential operators that assign a polarity value to an open variable contained in a preceding question. On his account, answers that use response particles always have sentential structure, but clausal material may be deleted under identity with material in the preceding question, as shown in (16):

- (16) A. Is John here? – B. Yes(, John is here).

The distribution of response particles in a given language is determined by the syntax of clause negation in that language. Centrally, Holmberg distinguishes between “middle” and “low” negation, where the former has sentential scope, whereas the latter exclusively scopes the VP. This is illustrated by the English example in (17):

- (17) She wouldn't [= middle negation] ever not [= low negation] dress up for an occasion like that. (Holmberg 2016: 156)

Thus, languages that systematically use the polarity-based system, such as Swedish, have only middle negation (Holmberg 2016: 165). Languages like Japanese, on the other hand, which systematically use the (dis)agreement system, have only low negation (Holmberg 2016: 197). In other words, the distinction between polarity-based and (dis)agreement-based systems can be read straight off the syntax (Holmberg 2016: 142).

As shown in (17), the syntax of some languages, incl. English, allows for both types of negation. Thus, in responses following a negative polar interrogative, the negation can be variously interpreted as either middle or low. This type of language may therefore have a mixed system of response particle usage (Holmberg 2016: 156f), allowing *yes* and *no* to be used with the same meaning:

- (18) A. Is he *not* coming? – B. Yes. (= He's [*not* coming]: agreement-based response)/No. (= He's *not* [coming]: polarity-based response.)

While this is, on the face of it, a neat account, it is not without problems. For one thing, the notion that response particles saturate an open polarity variable in the preceding utterance evidently cannot account for their use in responses to non-interrogative speech acts. Holmberg (2016: ch. 5) is aware of this shortcoming, and suggests that response particles are polyfunctional, positing that when responding to statements¹, the particles cannot convey new information. Hence, affirmative particles can be used on their own to respond with agreement to a positively polar statement. Negative particles, which express disagreement, must, however, be accompanied by a clausal response, as use of the bare particle would cause a feature clash. Holmberg (2016: 212) illustrates this with the examples in (19), where R2 is allegedly excluded because a bare particle response requires feature identity between the St(atement) and the R(esponse), whereas R4, where the following clause spells out the response, is fully acceptable:

- (19) St. John is coming. – R1. Yes./R2. *No./R3. Yes he is./R4. No he isn't.

Presumably, the converse is true when particles are used in response to negative statements, i.e. that a bare negative particle expressing agreement will be grammatical, whereas a

¹ Holmberg does not attempt to explain their use in responding to imperatives or exclamation.

disagreeing affirmative particle is only possible if accompanied by a clausal response. Both the grammaticality judgments in (19) and the extrapolated ones just mentioned, however, fly in the face of corpus evidence from Modern French. Thus, the data used for this paper (cf. section 5.2 for details) yield a number of cases of the bare negative particle *non* responding to a preceding positive statement (cf. (20)), as well as of a bare positive *si* responding to a preceding negative statement (cf. (21)):

- (20) La Dame. *Il est fou à lier.* – Le Commissaire. Non. (G. Courteline, *Le Commissaire est bon enfant*, 1900, pp. 14-16)
 ‘The Lady. He’s fit to be tied. – The Superintendent. No.’
 (21) Crockson. *L’amour n’est pas un amusement.* – Isabelle. Si! (M. Achard, *Voulez-vous jouer avec moi?*, 1924, pp. 145-151)
 ‘Crockson. Love is not an amusement. – Isabelle. Yes!’

Moreover, as argued by Fretheim (2017: 177f), a purely syntactic ellipsis account is difficult to extend to non-interrogative contexts, where the clause following the particle can be elided even under sloppy identity. In an exchange like (22), recourse to context, i.e. pragmatics, is thus needed to determine exactly what meaning is conveyed by *no*:

- (22) Anne. I didn’t like Peter’s performance much. – Ben. No. (= “No, I know *you* didn’t like Peter’s performance” or “No, *I* didn’t like Peter’s performance, *either*.”)

Secondly, even if confined to question-answer pairs, the model faces difficulties. As we saw above, Holmberg explains the fact that Swedish systematically uses the polarity-based system as resulting from a lack of low negation in that language. However, Danish – a closely related language which also uses a robustly polarity-based system – clearly does have low negation, as shown by the contrast in (23)-(24) below and the fact that double negation is possible in that language, cf. (25). Holmberg’s model cannot account for this, but would predict that Danish, like English, should be making use of a mixed system.

- (23) *Jeg har ikke glemt at trække gardinerne fra.*
 ‘I’ve not forgotten to open the curtains.’
 (24) *Jeg har glemt ikke at trække gardinerne fra.*
 ‘I’ve forgotten not to open the curtains.’
 (25) *Nej, selvfølgelig har jeg ikke glemt ikke at trække gardinerne fra!*
 ‘No, of course, I haven’t forgotten not to open the curtains!’

Moreover, superficially very similar data from different languages are variously interpreted by Holmberg as featuring middle vs low negation, to fit the theory. Thus, the fact that (26) below can be responded to by either *yes* (= “Occasionally, John doesn’t arrive on time for work”) or *no* (= John always arrives on time for work.) is used as evidence that English sometimes uses (dis)agreement-based responses and has both middle and low negation. Yet the structurally almost identical example from Swedish seen in (27) is not interpreted as evidence that this language might have both types of negation, as well:

- (26) Q. Does John sometimes *not* show up on time for work? – A1. Yes./A2. No.
 (Holmberg 2016: 155)
 (27) Q. *Har Johan nångång inte kommit i tid?* – A1. Ja./A2. Nej. (Holmberg 2016: 166 – his (50)).
 ‘Q. Has Johan ever *not* arrived on time? – A1. Yes. /A2. No.’

Further, also adducing data from Swedish, which has two affirmative particles, Fretheim (2017: 189f) falsifies Holmberg’s claim that a bare particle response to a question is acceptable only if the question and the answer express identical underlying propositions. Thus, in (28), the form *ja* used in B1 means “Yes, it was deliberate”, whereas *jo* in B2 means “Yes, I did drink up my coffee”:

- (28) Anne. *Drack du avsiktligt inte upp ditt kaffe?* – Ben1. *Ja*./Ben2. *Jo*.
 ‘Anne. Did you deliberately *not* drink up your coffee? – Ben1/2. *Yes*.’

Finally, Holmberg (2016: 154f) proposes that, in exchanges like (18) above, the choice between the polarity-based and the agreement-based response is closely linked to question orientation: if the question is negatively oriented, the answer will be agreement-based, whereas if the question is positively oriented, the answer will be polarity-based. As will be discussed further in section 5.3 below, however, question orientation is a complex and fundamentally pragmatic issue, which in a great many cases cannot be directly read off the syntax of a question. Indeed, as Holmberg unwittingly shows by adducing (18) above, it is not the syntactic position of the negator that determines the pragmatic interpretation of the question as either positively or negatively oriented, but rather (if anything) it is their pragmatic interpretation that leads hearers to assign to the negator a low *vs* a middle position in the syntactic tree.

On the basis of the above discussion, Holmberg’s purely syntactic account of response particle use would seem to be ultimately inadequate. Hence, it will not be appealed to in the analysis of the French particles proposed in sections 4-5 of this paper. The next section, 3.2, will consider an alternative, semantic, model. Section 4 will show that, despite being formulated partly on the basis of intuitive data from French, this second model runs into problems when faced with actual corpus data from that language.

3.2 Roelofsen & Farkas (2015): the use of response particles is semantically determined

Roelofsen & Farkas (2015), building on work by Pope (1972), propose a feature-based semantic model of response-particle distribution.² Contrary to Holmberg, Roelofsen & Farkas aim to account for response particle usage independently of the interrogative *vs* non-interrogative nature of the utterance that is being responded to.

According to these authors, crosslinguistically, response particles can express two types of polarity features. In a polarity-based system, particles chiefly express absolute polarity, i.e. the positive or negative polarity of the response itself. Their semantic representation will thus contain one of the features [+] or [-].

In (dis)agreement-based systems, on the other hand, particles express relative polarity, viz. whether or not the polarity of the response is identical to or different from that of the utterance that is being responded to. In such a system, the semantic representation of a response particle will contain one of the features [agree] or [reverse].

These two sets of features can be combined in a given language, such that we get four logically possible options, exemplified in (29)-(32) below, where the contents in square brackets after “B.” should in all cases be read as representing the semantics of a particle

² Strictly speaking, Roelofsen & Farkas’ account is not purely semantic, but does to some extent take pragmatics into account, by framing the use of response particles within a theory of common ground management. That theory, however, is highly idealized and treats dialogue as a simple matter of processing information by jointly assigning truth values to propositions with a view to reaching a stable information state.

response with the features shown before the colon. These examples show that the relative polarity feature [agree] works to either mark a positive response to a preceding utterance with positive polarity (cf. (29)) or a negative response to a preceding utterance with negative polarity (cf. (30)). Conversely, the feature [reverse] marks either a positive response to a preceding negative utterance, as in (31), or a negative response to a positively polar utterance, as in (32):

- (29) [agree, +]: A. Did John leave? – B. [John left.]
- (30) [agree, -]: A. Didn't John leave? – B. [John didn't leave.]
- (31) [reverse, +]: A. Didn't John leave? – B. [John left.]
- (32) [reverse, -]: A. Did John leave? – B. [John didn't leave.]

It is important to emphasize that, in Roelofsen & Farkas's (2015) system, the value [agree] thus concerns strictly formal agreement between two utterances in terms of the semantic notion of polarity. As will be seen below, this use of the notion of agreement is orthogonal to the pragmatic issue of interpersonal agreement between two interlocutors.

Within each pair of features, one feature is posited as more marked than the other, as shown in (33)-(34) (where the feature following '<' is the more marked of the two), and Roelofsen & Farkas (2015: 386) hypothesize that the more marked a feature is, the more pressure there will be for it to be overtly realized in a given language:

- (33) [+] < [-]
- (34) [agree] < [reverse]

Further, they argue that, due to these markedness relations, the features [+] and [agree] form a natural class, as do the features [-] and [reverse]. This results in the overall, crosslinguistically valid, markedness scale seen in (35) (Roelofsen & Farkas 2015: 388):

- (35) [agree, +] < [reverse, -] < [agree, -] < [reverse, +]

Ex hypothesi, languages should thus be under most pressure to lexicalize the type of response seen in (31) above with a special particle, and Roelofsen & Farkas (2015: 398ff) adduce the French language as an example of this. As noted in section 1 above, Modern Standard French makes use of three response particles, *oui*, *si*, and *non*. In Roelofsen & Farkas' model, the semantics of these particles should be represented as in (36)-(38), yielding the set of well-formed answers exemplified in (39)-(42):

- (36) *Oui* = [agree, +]
- (37) *Si* = [reverse, +]
- (38) *Non* = [reverse, -]/[agree, -]
- (39) A. *Jean est-il venu ?* – B. *Oui*. (= Jean came.)
'A. Did Jean come? – B. Yes.'
- (40) A. *Jean n'est-il pas venu ?* – B. *Si*. (= Jean came.)
'A. Didn't Jean come? – B. Yes(, he did.)'
- (41) A. *Jean n'est-il pas venu ?* – B. *Non*. (= Jean didn't come.)
'A. Didn't Jean come? – B. No.'
- (42) A. *Jean est-il venu ?* – B. *Non*. (= Jean didn't come.)
'A. Did Jean come? – B. No.'

This account of response particle usage is an undeniably elegant one. Moreover, it appears in the specific case of French to be in line with standard (intuition-based) descriptions of the

system used in that language. One thing that may seem surprising, in view of the markedness hierarchy in (35) above, is that French (along with various other languages) should have overtly lexicalized [agree, +] as a separate particle, whereas two of the more marked combinations, viz. [reverse, -] and [agree, -] share their surface expression. This may be deemed to be a minor point, however.

Nevertheless, it will be shown in section 4 that the model encounters further problems when confronted with a wider range of actual corpus data from French.

4 The system of response particles in Modern and Contemporary French

The existing literature on response-particle usage in French is quite modest. A number of studies, however, concur that the kind of data presented in (39)-(42) above, and on which Roelofsen & Farkas's account is based, give an incomplete, and partly misleading, picture of the norms that govern this area of synchronic grammar.

Starting with the most specialized of the three particles, *si*, it is, as Roelofsen & Farkas (2015: 398) propose, normally used to respond positively to a preceding negative utterance, cf. section 3.2, example (40) above. However, *si* may also be found responding to a non-negated utterance if that utterance conversationally implicates (Grice 1975) a negative proposition (Høybye 1939, Wilmet 1976, Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2001). This is shown in (43), where A's second turn implicates a negative assessment along the lines of "you're not being honest about your financial situation":

- (43) A. *t'as plus de sous ?* – B. *ben écoute i'm'reste 1000 machins et mais euh j'te dis la vie elle est chère* – A. *menteuse* – B. *ah si j'te jure hein* (from Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2001 : 104)
 'A. haven't you got any more money? – B. well, look, I've got 1,000 thingies left and but er I'm telling you life is expensive – A. liar – B. oh yes cross my heart'

Roelofsen & Farkas's (2015) representation of *si* by the feature combination [reverse, +] cannot account for this type of usage, in as much as A's utterance could only be meaningfully expanded into a full clause with positive polarity, i.e. *tu es une menteuse* ('you're a liar').³ In other words, there is no reversal of the polarity of the preceding utterance in instances like

³ Lest it be objected that *menteuse* might be analyzed as semantically negative, note that it is difficult to use *si* even to mark negative-to-positive reversal in responses to clauses containing words that are lexically, as opposed to syntactically, negated, as shown in (i)-(iv)(cf. Wilmet 1976: 248). Using it to respond to an utterance that is at best semantically negative, as in (v)-(vi) seems clearly unacceptable in a null context:

- (i) A. *Pierre n'est pas fidèle.* – B. *Si !*
 'Pierre is *not* faithful. – B. *Yes*(, he is faithful)!
 (ii) A. *Pierre n'est pas heureux.* – B. *Si !*
 'A. Pierre is *not* happy. – B. *Yes*(, he is happy)!
 (iii) A. *Pierre est infidèle.* – B. *??Si !*
 'Pierre is *unfaithful*. – B. *Yes*(, he is faithful)!
 (iv) A. *Pierre est malheureux.* – B. **Si !*
 'A. Pierre is *unhappy*. – B. *Yes*(, he is happy)!
 (v) *Pierre est adultère.* – B. **Si !*
 'Pierre is *adulterous*. – B. *Yes*(, he is faithful)!
 (vi) A. *Pierre est triste.* – B. **Si !*
 'A. Pierre is *sad*. – B. *Yes*(, he is happy)!

See further sect. 5.4 *in fine*.

this one, but rather the response expresses interpersonal disagreement with the inferred, pragmatic thrust of the preceding utterance.

Conversely, even in contexts where *si* could be expected to occur, i.e. in response to a syntactically negative preceding utterance, a number of studies using a mix of native-speaker intuitions, spoken and written corpus data, and experimental data (Høybye 1939, Heinz 1976, Wilmet 1976, Platin 1982, Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2001) have shown that native speakers may nevertheless prefer the particle *oui*.

This is more or less systematically the case following the negative question tags *n'est-ce pas* and *non* in combination with a positively polar main clause, as shown in (44)-(45) below; as well as in agreeing responses to negative exclamatives (cf. (46)), or to interrogatives featuring *n'est-ce pas* as a matrix clause, as in (47):

- (44) – *Quel acteur, n'est-ce pas ? – Oh oui !* (P.Pécherot, *Les Brouillards de la Butte*, 2001, p. 60)
 ‘What an actor, *isn't he?* – Oh yes(, he is)!’
- (45) *Mais vous voyez comme vous pourriez être bien, non ? Oui, reconnut Max, la seule chose, c'est que j'aurais un peu peur de m'ennuyer.* (J.Echenoz, *Au piano*, 2003, p. 142)
 ‘But you see how comfortable you could be, *don't you?* Yes(, I do), Max admits, the only thing is I'd be a bit afraid of getting bored.’
- (46) A. *N'est-il pas beau, ce garçon ! – B. Oui.*
 ‘A. *Isn't he a handsome boy!* – B. Yes(, he is).’
- (47) *Moïse, n'est-ce pas que tu es un bon petit Juif ? – Oui, Madame Rosa,* (R.Gary, *La Vie devant soi*, 1975, pp. 198-200)
 ‘Moïse, *isn't it true* that you're a good little Jew ? – Yes, madame Rosa,’

In all of these cases, the preceding utterance – despite containing a syntactic negation – is, of course, strongly pragmatically oriented towards a positive response (see further section 5.3 below). While this positive orientation is a grammaticalized feature of the construction types in (44)-(47), *oui* may also (albeit less systematically) be preferred to *si* in response to other negated questions if these are interpretable as positively oriented in a given context. Thus, if the context suggests that a negated interrogative is intended as a rhetorical, rather than a genuine question, *oui* is usually the preferred answer, as shown in (48) below. And even where a negative question is genuinely information-seeking, but the context suggests that the speaker has reason to believe that the answer will be positive, *oui* may be preferred, as shown in (49):

- (48) M. */est-c= que/ ça serait pas plus: plus bi- euh meilleur si: si on: si on parlait d'autre chose et pas: toujours seul=ment des devoirs pa=c= que comme ça l'enfant et les par-/ – P. oui bien sûr,/* (CLAPI 8f/6lh)⁴

⁴ The CLAPI corpus of spontaneous native-speaker conversation uses the following transcription conventions:

/ rising intonation
 \ falling intonation
 : elongated sound
 = latching
 - abrupt interruption of the speech stream
 , brief pause

- ‘M. wouldn’t it be more <bi-> er better if if we if we talked about other things and not always just about homework because that way the child and the pa- – P. yes of course’
 (49) S. *y a pas de piscine*/ – M. *piscine* \ oh oui/ (CLAPI 79/4di)
 ‘S. isn’t there a swimming pool – M. a swimming pool oh yes’

All of these instances are problematic for Roelofsen & Farkas (2015), who assign the semantic feature combination [agree, +] to *oui*. Recall that, for these authors, [agree] means that the response has the same polarity as the utterance it is responding to. In (44)-(49), however, *oui* actually reverses a syntactically expressed negation, even though, at the pragmatic level, it expresses interpersonal agreement with the thrust of the preceding speaker’s utterance.

Further issues are revealed if we look at the distribution of *oui* vs *non*. Thus, in a number of cases *oui* is or may be preferred over *non* following a negative utterance, even though the response agrees with the responded-to utterance in terms of polarity and should therefore carry the semantic feature [-]. Moving, as above, from more to less conventionalized configurations, we find that only *oui* can constitute a felicitous global response agreeing with or acquiescing to a series of non-interrogative utterances by the same speaker in which positive and negative polarity alternate, as in (50) below (cf. Høybye 1939: 48, Wilmet 1976: 240). Had the second speaker chosen to answer *non* in this case, she would have been heard as responding only to the last two, syntactically negative, clauses of the first speaker. Using *oui* allows her to acquiesce to the series of directives produced by the first speaker in its entirety, incl. the last two:

- (50) *Je vais te donner ce papier bleu. Tu vas le leur porter. Tu courras bien. Ne le perds pas et ne le déchire pas.* – Oui, madame. (J. Romain, *Mort de quelqu’un*, 1911, p. 39)
 ‘I’m going to give you this blue paper. Take it to them. Run. Don’t lose it and don’t tear it. – Yes, ma’am.’

Also situated towards the more conventionalized end of the spectrum are agreeing responses to utterances that contain the expression *pas mal* (‘pretty okay’, ‘quite a bit/few’, lit. ‘not bad’). Here, *oui* is typically the preferred particle, as seen in (51) below. In the majority of its uses, *pas mal* is a fixed collocation whose sense is non-negative (as the translation suggests), so this case is broadly parallel to the types of configurations seen in (44)-(46) above.

- (51) *T’es pas mal non plus dans le genre...* – Oui, mais moi je ne fume pas ! (A. Gavalda, *Ensemble, c’est tout*, 2004, p. 492)
 ‘You’re quite a bit like that, too [lit. You’re not bad in that way, either]... – Yes, but I don’t smoke.’

Analogously to what was true of *oui* vs *si*, there are, however, also frequent non-conventionalized cases of native speakers using *oui*, rather than *non*, to agree with or acquiesce to a preceding non-interrogative utterance bearing negative polarity. Thus, in (52), we see a speaker using *oui* following a negative imperative, and in (53), *oui* expresses interpersonal agreement with a negative assertion:

- (52) Ap182. *ne quittez pas*/ – AS. oui (CLAPI d9/d0j)
 ‘Ap182. hold on [lit. don’t hang up] – AS. yes.’

- (53) F1. =*c'est pas logique la phrase* – F2. *ah oui c'est ça i' y a un truc là hein*
(CLAPI 12a/o8)
'F1. the sentence isn't logical – F2 ah yes, that's right there's something wrong there'

Finally, as pointed out by Wilmet (1976: 249), following a negative utterance, disagreeing speakers will use the negative response particle *non*, rather than *si*, if they wish to distance themselves from the contents of the preceding speech act, while avoiding committing to a particular polarity, be it negative or positive, cf. the contrast in (54)-(55):

- (54) A. *Tu n'aimes pas.* – B. *Non, ce n'est pas ça.* (from Wilmet 1976 : 249)
'A. You don't like it. – B. No, it's not that.' (→ Whether I like it or not is irrelevant.)
(55) A. *Tu n'aimes pas.* – B. *Si, ce n'est pas ça.*
'A. You don't like it. – B. Yes, (I do,) it's not that.'

Based on the above, the markedness relations obtaining between the three particles can be represented as in (56):

- (56) *oui* < *non* < *si*

While this is, indeed, the order predicted by Roelofsen & Farkas (2015: 388)(cf. (35) in section 3.2 above), the data adduced in the present section have been shown to be incompatible with the feature combinations posited in their model. A different approach is therefore needed in order to justify this markedness hierarchy with empirical accuracy. In fact, it is important to note that these relations can only be loosely described as a markedness hierarchy: the relations obtaining between *oui*, *si*, and *non* do not constitute a semantic markedness hierarchy in the strict sense, whereby a less marked item can always substitute for a more marked one. While *oui* can sometimes substitute for *non* or *si*, and *non* may occasionally take the place of an expected *si*, there are nevertheless contexts where such substitutions would not be felicitous. Thus, to the extent *oui* is the “unmarked” item, it is because this morpheme is in principle capable of expressing (i) a positively polar response to both positively and negatively polar preceding utterances, and (ii) interpersonal agreement with a positively orientated the preceding utterance, even in cases where that utterance has negative polarity at the semantic level. *Si*, on the other hand, is the most “marked” item of the trio because it can respond only to a fairly restricted subset of previous utterance types, namely those that are syntactically negative and, for the most part, also negatively oriented, as well as – more rarely – utterances that carry a negative implicature. The item in the middle, *non*, always represents a negatively polar proposition, but may according to context express either interpersonal agreement or disagreement – and as seen in (54), occasionally even neutrality – *vis-à-vis* the pragmatic thrust of the preceding utterance.

In sum, the discussion in this section and in section 3.1 strongly suggests that neither syntax nor semantics is sufficient to explain how response particles function, not just in French, but also in other languages, and that pragmatics crucially needs to be taken into account. In some sense, this is unsurprising, given that pragmatics is fundamentally about dialogue and that response particles, by their very nature, are eminently dialogic items. Intuitively, therefore, the French language is unlikely to be unique in this respect. Moreover, the French system of response particles has in fact changed over time, older stages of the language having made regular use of a second negative particle, *nenni*, which has fallen into near-obsolescence in the modern period. As other languages, incl. English (e.g. Wallage & van der Wurff 2013), have likewise seen their systems undergo restructuring in the course of their history, the

remainder of this paper will argue that not just pragmatics, but historical pragmatics, may be key to understanding how response particles work synchronically.

5 The diachronic evolution of the French response particles

As already noted in section 2 above, French's mother language, Latin, did not possess conventionalized response particles. Instead, that language made use of echo responses, as in (57)-(58) below, and/or of a variety of adverbs which were not specialized for use in responses to a previous utterance (cf. section 2), such as SIC 'thus' (which is the etymon of the French response particle *si*), ITA 'thus', CERTE 'certainly', or IMMO 'on the contrary', among others (Thesleff 1960), cf. (59)-(60) below. The conventionalized response particles that we find in French, and in Romance more broadly, thus represent a diachronic innovation.

- (57) *Eho, non tu dixti esse inter eos inimicitias, carnufex ? – Sunt.* (Terence, *Andria*, 2nd c. BCE, 853-854)
 'Why, didn't you say *there was* enmity between them, scoundrel? – There is.'
- (58) *Non taces? – Non Hercle vero taceo.* (Plautus, *Menaechmi*, 3rd-2nd c. BCE, 612-613)
 'Won't you *shut up*? – I damn well won't shut up.'
- (59) *Captus est? – Ita.* (Plautus, *Captivi*, 3rd-2nd c. BCE, 262-263)
 'Is he a captive? – Indeed.'
- (60) *Coges me? – Minime.* (Terence, *Adelphi*, 2nd c. BCE, 194)
 'Will you force me? – Not at all.'

5.1 Etymological sources of the French response particles

Initially, a two-member system of particle responses arose in Medieval French, consisting of the particles *oïl* ('yes') and *nenil* ('no'). Both of these find their diachronic sources in anaphoric elliptical echo constructions, *oïl* having been formed by univerbation of the 3ps masculine form of the expression *o je/tu/il...* etc. ('that I/you/he...' < Latin HOC ILLE (FECIT) 'that he (did)'), and *nenil* by a similar process from the collocation *non il* ('not he'). The affirmative particle *oïl* is lexicalized at least as early as 1100, and the negative particle *nenil* by 1130. Medieval French had no standardized orthography, so a variety of spellings of these two particles are found in the texts. In both cases, the final /l/ was gradually more and more frequently elided in the spoken language, eventually yielding the modern forms *oui* and *nenni*. Spellings without a final '-l' are found in the Frantext data base (see section 5.2 below) from the 14th c. onwards, and become generalized as of the 16th c. The use of these two particles is exemplified in (61)-(62):

- (61) « *L'aveir Carlun, est il apareillez ?* » / *E cil respunt : « Oïl, sire, asez bien ;*
(Roland, c. 1125, pp. 66-68)
 '“Is Charlemagne's treasure ready?” And he answers, “Yes, my lord, perfectly;’
- (62) *Comment, ne l'aimes tu ? – Nenil.* (*Roman d'Enéas*, c. 1160, pp. 518-520)
 'What, don't you love him?' – No.'

Alongside the two fully lexicalized forms *oïl* and *nenil*, Medieval French also made use of two echo constructions consisting of either the affirmative adverb *si* or the clause negator *non* (precursor of the Modern French *ne*) followed by a finite verb (and, in some instances, also other clause constituents), as shown in (63)-(64) below. Although *si* and *non* in these

constructions were not yet response particles in the strict sense, the two constructions were conventionalized to some degree, in as much as only certain types of verbs could occur in them, principally the auxiliaries *être* ('be') and *avoir* ('have'), and the pro-verb *faire* ('do'). The construction with *non* was particularly restricted in this respect (cf. Reid 1939, Larrivée 2011, Hansen 2018).

- (63) *Je ne sçay qui / vous meut, car je ne vous ay pas fait desloyauté, que / je sache.*
 – *Si avez, dist elle, (CNN, 1456, pp. 211-212)*
 'I don't know what's upsetting you, for I haven't been disloyal to you, as far as I know. – You certainly have, she said,'
- (64) *Bien sai tu me tiens por musart. / – Non faz, dist Renart, par ma foi, (Renart, br. 9, c. 1200, pp. 101-103)*
 'I know well that you consider me a fool. – I do not, Renart said, by my troth,'

Several things should be noted at the outset:

First, neither *si* nor *non* is restricted to occur in responses to preceding utterances, and both occur freely in contexts that are both monological and monologic (cf. Roulet et al. [1987: 60] and section 2 above). Their use in such contexts is excluded from the purview of the present study.⁵

Secondly – unlike *si*, which, in direct speech, systematically retains the finite verb until the latter half of the 16th c. (Pohl 1976: 204), and continues in many instances to exhibit the frozen form *si fait* until the 20th c. – *non* starts to appear without a following verb already in the mid-12th c., in a substantial subset of its occurrences.⁶ In the earliest such examples, *non* is accompanied by one or more other elements which are at least open to interpretation as constituents of an elliptical negative clause, cf. (65) below. From 1200, however, we start to see examples such as (66), where *non* appears to function like a fully-fledged response particle. Still, it may be significant that, in that example, *non* is nevertheless followed by a clause that makes the speaker's meaning explicit. No examples of *non* constituting the sole linguistic material in a response to a preceding utterance appear prior to 1285 in my data, and it is not until the 18th c. that tokens of *non* accompanied by a finite verb disappear entirely.

- (65) *Ne sez que diz, ne te tocha. / – Non voir, cop ne plaie n'i pert, / mais li briez qui antor ert / m'a molt navré dedans le cors. (Enéas 2, 1155, pp. 92-94)*
 '“You don't know what you're saying, it didn't touch you. – Not true/No, indeed, no injury or wound appears, but the letter that was wrapped around it has wounded me deeply.'
- (66) « *Renart, n'est mie Lietart chiche. / – Non, fait Renart, ainz est haitiez !* (Renart, br. 10, 1200, pp. 65-67)
 '“Renart, Lietart is not stingy. – No, says Renart, on the contrary, he's generous.'

Thirdly, in Medieval French, *si* is not yet a polarity-reversing particle as such. Rather, it has a strongly assertive meaning which makes it incompatible with clause negation (Marchello-Nizia 1985: 52) and, by the same token, compatible with negative-to-positive polarity-reversing contexts, such as that in (63) above. In fact, *si*-reponses such as that shown in (67)

⁵ Interested readers are referred to Reid (1939), Larrivée (2011), and Hansen (2018) for discussion of non-dialogic uses of the clause negator *non*, and to Marchello-Nizia (1985) for discussion of the full range of uses of *si*, in Medieval French.

⁶ Indeed, according to Thesleff (1960: 56), *NON* was occasionally used in responses without a verb already in Latin.

below, which confirm or accept the contents, and by implication the polarity, of a preceding utterance, are just as common in Medieval French as instances like (63) that resemble the Modern French polarity-reversing use of *si*. It is only in the second half of the 15th c. that uses of *si* in confirmatory contexts begin to decrease in frequency (Marchello-Nizia 1985: 200). In the course of the Renaissance, these uses gradually become obsolete and it is only then that polarity reversal becomes semanticized as a context-independent part of the meaning of the response particle *si*.

- (67) *Dame ge aim, nel puis noier. / Vos me devez bien consoiller. – Si ferai ge, ...*
 (*Enéas* 2, 1155, pp. 79-80)
 ‘My lady, I am in love, I can’t deny it. You must advise me well. – So I will,...

In sum, then, earlier stages of French made use of two different particles – *oil* and *si+V* – in response types that can be broadly described as affirmative, and similarly of two different particles – *nenil* and *non±V* – in contexts that can be broadly described as negative. Moreover, each of the affirmative particles can be said to form a natural pair with one of the negative particles, in terms of their etymological sources and the kinds of constructions that they (preferentially) occur in, i.e. a truly particle-like, “absolute” use in the case of *oil/nenil* vs an elliptical clause-like use of *si/non*.

Assuming that the principle of non-synonymy (Cruse 1986: 270) holds for Medieval French, this suggests that there may have been a division of labor between the two pairs of particles at this stage of language evolution. Furthermore, one member of the first pair of particles, viz. *nenil*, eventually drops out of use, while one member of the second pair of particles, viz. *si*, diachronically undergoes a gradual change in its semantics and its distribution. It seems, therefore, that a corpus-based diachronic study might shed further light on the formation of the Modern French system of response particles.

5.2 Data used

The study is based on data from Frantext, an evolving electronic data base, which at the time of writing contains a total of 5,118 texts and close to 300 mio. words. The texts contained in this data base span the period from the 10th to the early 21st century, thus representing almost the entire history of the French language, whose earliest known text dates back to the year 842. Moreover, Frantext represent a range of written genres, although literary texts are predominant.

When searching for instances of the four response particles in this corpus, certain adjustments had to be made, which were not the same for all four particles. These adjustments are described below, and must be kept in mind when considering subsequent quantitative statements.

Tokens of the particle *nenil/nenni* (and its orthographic variants) could unproblematically be searched for across the entire data base.

In the case of *oil/oui* (and its orthographic variants), up until and including the 16th c., all tokens contained in the data base were searched for. However, from the 17th c. onwards, the number of texts contained in the data base increases exponentially, with a resulting explosion in the number of tokens of the form *oui* (which by this time has lost its final *-l* in the written form, cf. section 5.1 above). It was therefore necessary to proceed with a sampling of the texts in the data base from that point on. This was done at appr. 25-year intervals, choosing two texts by two different authors for each time point (i.e. a total of eight texts per century),

taking into account the nature of the texts so as to favor genres that were more dialogal/dialogic in nature (cf. Roulet et al. 1987: 60, as well as section 2 above).

As for *non*, this form is highly polyfunctional throughout the history of French. Its token frequency at all stages of the language is therefore correspondingly high, and a global search at any point from the 12th c. onwards would have resulted in an overwhelming number of hits that would have made manual sorting and subsequent qualitative analysis impossible to carry out within a reasonable time frame. In so far as the Frantext search engine is unable to reliably distinguish the use of *non* as a response particle, it was therefore necessary to proceed with a sampling of the texts in the data base, already from the 12th c. onwards. This was done following the same principles as in the case of post-16th c. *oui*, except that prior to the 17th c., only one text per time point was included.

A number of tokens of *oil/oui*, *nenil/nenni*, and *non* were excluded because they were either (a) instantiations of the use of these particles in indirect speech (cf. section 2, and in particular example (8), above); (b) instantiations of the use of *oil/oui*, *nenil/nenni* or *non* as emphatic particles in monologic contexts (cf. section 2, and in particular examples (6)-(7), above); (c) tokens appearing in the very first line of a dramatic scene, where it was impossible to determine what, if anything, they might be responding to; (d) tokens appearing to respond to a non-verbal signal produced by an interlocutor; (e) uses of *non* outside the context of dialogic response, such as in constituent negation; or (f) homographs representing a different morpheme altogether. The latter was chiefly the case with some tokens of the form *ouy*, which represented the past participle of the by now defunct perception verb *ouïr* ('to hear').

In total, 1,780 tokens of *oil/oui*, 851 tokens of *nenil/nenni*, and 810 tokens of *non* were analyzed. No instances were found of any of the three forms in responses prior to the 12th c. Table 1 shows the breakdown of instances, as well as the normalized frequencies of both particles, per century.

It is important for the reader to be aware that, for the sampling-related reasons explained above, neither the absolute number of tokens nor the normalized frequencies seen in Table 1 are directly comparable. Nevertheless, the latter at least suggest that these three particles were used with broadly similar frequencies throughout the Medieval period. As Table 1 shows, that begins to change in the Renaissance, and in particular from the 17th c. onwards, where *nenni* experiences a very sharp drop in frequency.⁷ *Oui*, on the other hand, and to a lesser degree *non*, see a significant increase in their use in the same period, although the sudden massive jumps in the 18th century are no doubt explained by the deliberate choice to favor the inclusion of theatrical, i.e. inherently dialogal, texts in the sample.⁸

Table 1: Number of tokens and normalized frequencies of *oil/oui*, *nenil/nenni*, and *non* in responses, 12th-21st c.

	<i>Oil/oui</i>	<i>Nenil/nenni</i>	<i>Non</i>
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⁷ The small upturn in the 21st c. data is probably an idiosyncrasy of the still relatively small number of contemporary texts in the data base. In any case, both the number of tokens and the normalized frequency of *nenni* are negligible in this period.

⁸ Readers may wonder why this massive increase in frequency does not occur already in the 17th c. No doubt, the reason is that, apart from Molière, the 17th c. dramatists included in Frantext strongly favor the more formal genre of tragedy. From the 18th c. onwards, the preference gradually shifts towards genres that allow for more naturalistic dialogue.

	No. of tokens	Freq./10K	No. of tokens	Freq./10K	No. of tokens	Freq./10K
12th c	101	0.711	68	0.478	7	0.549
13th c.	150	0.899	103	0.617	26	1.283
14th c.	319	0.679	214	0.456	16	0.368
15th c.	121	0.216	190	0.339	32	1.154
16th c.	350	0.433	101	0.125	54	1.05
17th c.	111	3.34	44	0.018	102	3.355
18th c.	180	13.048	38	0.01	159	11.525
19th c.	252	14.24	58	0.007	189	10.68
20th c.	174	7.3	21	0.001	208	8.742
21st c.	22	8.48	14	0.009	17	6.55

Si represented a particular problem. This particle is even more polyfunctional than *non*, particularly in texts from the Medieval and Renaissance periods, so text sampling alone could not eliminate the problem of thousands of irrelevant hits. Rather than searching for *si* on its own, searches were therefore carried out for tokens of *si* immediately followed by a finite form of one of the three verbs that are almost always found with the use of this particle in responses up until the 16th c. (viz. *être*, *avoir*, and *faire*, cf. section 5.1 above). Even so, a great many of the examples ultimately had to be discarded, mostly because they did not represent the use of *si* in responses, and in a few cases, because they represented the now obsolete confirmatory (as opposed to polarity-reversing) use of the particle seen in example (67), section 5.1 above.

As the number of useful tokens thus arrived at was comparatively quite small, viz. a total of 99, qualitative analysis was also carried out on a handful of examples from texts that were not part of the sub-corpus described above, bringing the total to 114. Those additional examples figure in parentheses in column 2 of Table 2 below. They have not been included in the normalized frequencies listed in column 3. Even though the figures for the four particles are not directly comparable, as explained above, the very substantial difference between the normalized frequencies of *oui* and *non*, on the one hand, and those of *si* on the other, nevertheless support the latter's status as a marked form, not just in Modern and Contemporary French, but at all stages of the language.⁹

Table 2: Number of tokens and normalized frequencies of non-confirmatory *si* in responses, 12th-21st c.

	<i>Si</i>	
	No. of tokens	Freq./10K
12th c	2(+3)	0.157
13th c.	3(+2)	0.148
14th c.	4(+1)	0.092
15th c.	9(+1)	0.324
16th c.	12	0.213

⁹ The complete absence of *si* in the 21st c. data is an idiosyncrasy of the text sample. While infrequent, *si* is without a doubt still in use in present-day standard French.

17th c.	2(+8)	0.065
18th c.	1	0.074
19th c.	20	1.13
20th c.	46	1.93
21st c.	0	0

In sum, when interpreting Tables 1 and 2, it is important to be aware of the following *caveats*:

- The token frequencies of the four particles are by no means directly comparable.
- The normalized frequencies of the *oui*, *nenni*, and *non* per century are not directly comparable, but may be assumed to give a reasonably good indication of the relative frequencies of the three particles in any given century.
- The tokens and normalized frequencies of *si* represent only uses corresponding to its present-day meaning. (The frequencies for the 12th-15th c. thus exclude the particle's subsequently obsolete, confirmatory use. Up until and including the 14th c, the latter use represents 1/3-1/2 of all of *si*'s uses in direct responses.)

5.3 Classification of response particle uses

The 3,555 response particle tokens that were retained for qualitative analysis were classified according to the criteria in (a)-(d) below:

- (a) Whether the speech act that the particle was responding to was a question or not.

The category "Question" included not just examples whose syntactic form was interrogative, but also imperatives of the type "Tell me whether p!", as well as declaratives of the type "I'd like to know whether p" if it was clear from the context that the speaker might plausibly expect the hearer to know whether p was the case.

If the responded-to utterance was classified as a non-question in the first instance, it was subcategorized according to whether (part of) it nevertheless implicated a question or not. Thus, in (68), the utterance that *Oil* responds to constitutes, in the first instance, a promise or suggestion to take the hearer somewhere. At the same time, however, the conditional clause *se vous volés* implicates the question whether the hearer actually wants to be taken there, and this implicated question is replied to in the part of the response that follows *Oil*:

- (68) ...*et la vous menrons, se vous volés.* » – « *Oil, dist li rois, nous ne desirons aultre cose.* » (Froissart, *Chroniques*, 1400, p. 139)
 '...and we'll take you there *if you want.*' – "Yes, said the King, we want nothing else."

- (b) Whether the responded-to utterance was syntactically positively or negatively polar. This criterion should be self-explanatory.
- (c) Whether the preceding utterance was pragmatically oriented towards a positive or a negative response, or had no clear pragmatic orientation.

Pragmatic orientation was defined from the point of view of the person responding, in terms of whether or not s/he could reasonably assume – in the particular context given – that the speaker of the preceding utterance believed p or ¬p to be the more plausible (or in the case of orders and requests, the more desirable) alternative. It is important to bear in mind that no

matter what type of speech act precedes them, responses are of course in no way compelled to respect the pragmatic orientation of that utterance.

Non-questions in the data base were systematically analyzed as oriented towards a response sharing the same polarity. Thus, for instance, a positively polar assertion like (69) below was classified as being pragmatically oriented towards a positively polar response. Conversely, a negatively polar request like (70) was classified as pragmatically oriented towards a negatively polar response.

- (69) Le Moine. Entre ton peuple et toi, balancer, c'est blasphème. – Toussaint. *Oui*,
(A. de Lamartine, *Toussaint Louverture*, 1850, pp. 1296-1298)
'The Monk. To hesitate between your people and yourself is blasphemy. – Toussaint.
Yes,'
- (70) Commandant. ...Ne me faites pas attendre pour dîner, Madame la
Commandante. – La Commandante. *Non, non,* (Carmontelle, *Le Prisonnier*, 1775, pp.
145-148)
'Commander. ...Don't make me wait for dinner, Madam. – Commander's Wife. No,
no,'

In the case of questions, it was necessary to have recourse to context in order to determine their pragmatic orientation. As shown by the constructed examples in (71)-(73) below, one and the same positively polar question form can be positively oriented, negatively oriented, or non-oriented, depending on the precise context in which it appears:

- (71) A. *Ce weekend, je vais à un colloque sur la pragmatique des questions.* – B.
Tiens ! Ça t'intéresse ? (= positive orientation)
'A. This weekend, I'm going to a workshop on the pragmatics of questions. – B. Oh!
Is that of interest to you?'
- (72) [Divorcing couple :] A. *Tu as passé une bonne journée ?* – B. *Oh, écoute ! Ça*
t'intéresse ? (= negative orientation)
'A. Did you have a good day? – B. Oh, come now! Is that of interest to you?'
- (73) *J'ai envie d'aller voir le nouveau film d'Isabelle Huppert. Ça t'intéresse ?* (= no orientation)
'I'd like to go see the new movie with Isabelle Huppert. Is that of interest to you?'

While it is sometimes assumed that negatively polar questions are necessarily oriented towards a positive response, that is in fact far from systematically the case, as shown by the contrast pair in (74)-(75) below. Unlike their positively polar counterparts, negatively polar questions are not normally without orientation, however:

- (74) [Listening to the radio :] A. *Qui c'est qui chante là ?* – B. *C'est pas France*
Gall ? (= positive orientation)
'A. Who's that singing ? – B. Isn't it France Gall?'
- (75) [Listening to the radio :] A. *J'adore Véronique Sanson !* – B. *Ah bon ! C'est*
pas France Gall ? (= negative orientation)
'A. I love Véronique Sanson! – B. Oh, I see! Is it not France Gall(, then)?

With respect to the data base at hand, wherever there wasn't enough context available to determine the pragmatic orientation of a question reliably, that question was classified as having no orientation.

Indirect requests taking the form of yes/no questions, such as (76) below, were analyzed as questions, but with the same inherent pragmatic orientation as non-questions. Analyzing such utterances as questions is justified by two things: (i) that the speaker does often have reason to be uncertain about the validity of the proposition expressed, and (ii) that such indirect requests are, in fact, overwhelmingly responded to both as yes/no questions (i.e. by verbal affirmation or negation) and as requests (i.e. by non-verbal action) in naturally occurring interaction. Moreover, at a conceptual level, indirect speech acts in the interrogative form have of course classically been argued to be questions about hearer-based felicity conditions on the speech act that they seek to perform (Gordon & Lakoff 1975).

- (76) Paturel. ...*Voulez-vous dire à Madame que je lui serai très-obligé de venir un instant.* – Rosalie. *Oui, monsieur.* (H. Meilhac/L. Halévy, *La Boule*, 1875, pp. 33-35)
 ‘Paturel. ...*Would you tell my wife that I’ll be much obliged if she’d come here a moment?* – Rosalie. Yes, sir.’

- (d) Tokens of the particles *non* and *si* were further classified according to whether or not they were followed by a finite verb. Like (b), this criterion needs no further explanation.

5.4 Findings

The most salient result to emerge from the analysis is that there does, indeed, seem to have been a clear division of labor between the two pairs of particle responses, i.e. *oil/nenil* vs *si+V/non±V*, in Medieval and Renaissance French, such that the fully lexicalized pair *oil/nenil* were overwhelmingly used to respond to questions, whereas *non±V* and, to a lesser degree, *si+V* were conversely preferred in responses to speech acts other than questions. This is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Percentage of uses of different particles in responses to questions

This broadly complementary distribution of the two pairs lasting up until the 17th c. may be explained by the fact that polar questions are different from other speech acts in requiring a response that represents a proposition with a polarity value. While such a response may be

conveyed by non-verbal means, producing a verbal response is the normative way of going about it. That having been done, nothing further is required of the respondent in interactional terms. Other types of speech acts, e.g. assertions or exclamations, either do not normatively require responses at all (although in practice, responses are of course often provided), or – as in the case of orders and requests, for instance – they normatively require responses of a non-verbal kind in the first instance, these being optionally accompanied or preceded by a verbal response.¹⁰ This being the case, it is perhaps not surprising that the French language chose to lexicalize standard responses to polar questions as a matter of priority.

That said, we see in Figure 1 that this division of labor between the two pairs of particle response types is never categorical, but that some degree of variation is present in all centuries. Part of this variation may, however, be accounted for by the fact that – as observed in section 5.3 above (cf. example (68) in particular) – some non-questions responded to by *oïl* or *nenil* nevertheless implicate a question. If such instances are included in the category of “questions”, the percentage counts in Figure 1 can be amended as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Percentage of uses of different particles in responses either to a question or to a non-question implying a question

The existence of some degree of variation in response particle usage from the outset of course also provides the prerequisite for subsequent change to the system (Hopper & Traugott 1993: 36). In that respect, the non-questions implying a question may have played a crucial role in providing language users with so-called bridging contexts, i.e. ambiguous contexts in which a given linguistic item or construction may be used by speakers in accordance with its conventional meaning or function, but at the same time be interpreted by others as instantiating an innovative use (Heine 2002: 86). Thus, for instance, in a context such as (77)

¹⁰ In addition, some more specialized types of speech acts project (but may fall short of actually requiring) specialized forms of uptake, such as the expression of thanks (in the case of promises or compliments, for instance) or “You’re on!” (in the case of bets), which cannot so easily be conveyed by “generic” particles like *yes* and *no*.

below, it is quite possible that the second speaker's *Nenil* is in fact intended normatively, as a response to the implicated question "Do you command me to come to you?". Because that question is merely implicated, however, some hearers/readers may well have interpreted this type of occurrence as evidence that *nenil* could be used to respond to non-interrogative speech acts, including oaths or promises:

- (77) *Dist Bernars : « Sire, se vous le comandés, / G'irai od vous, foi que doi Damedé ! » / « Nenil, » dist il, « frere, vous n'i venrés ! (Mon. Guillaume 2, c. 1180, pp. 339-340)*
 'Bernard said, "My Lord, if you command me to, I'll go with you, I swear by my faith in God!" – "No, he said, my brother, you shall not come!'

In the 16th c., the distribution of the particles begins to change. Thus, while only 4.1% of the 15th c. occurrences of *oil/oui* were used to answer speech acts that didn't even implicate a question, that figure rises to 24.9% in the 16th c., and to 40.6% in the 17th c.

Conversely, *non* – which by the 16th c. appears without a following verb in 2/3 of its occurrences, and in 92.2% of them in the 17th c. – increasingly takes the place of *nenil* in response to (implicated) questions. Thus, while only 3.1% of the 15th-century tokens of *non* in the data base are produced in response to an implicated question, and none to an explicit question, as many as 35.2% of the 16th c. tokens, and 44.1% of the 17th c. tokens respond to an explicit question, with an additional 5.9% in the 17th c. responding to an implicated question.

From the 18th c. onwards, *oui* and *non* are similarly distributed, with roughly half of their respective occurrences responding to explicit or implicated questions, and the other half to other types of speech acts.

Nenil/nenni, on the other hand, does not follow suit, but retains its preference for (implicated) questions until the 18th c., from which time its distribution starts to fluctuate markedly, following its previously mentioned sharp drop in overall frequency in the 17th c. (cf. section 5.2 above). It is noteworthy that 18th-c. *nenni* abruptly widens its remit to embrace responses to non-interrogative speech acts, to a point where the latter constitute the majority of its contexts of occurrence, only to move back in the opposite direction from the 19th c. onwards. As Table 1 (in section 5.2) and Figure 2 show, *non* had already established itself as the closest negative counterpart to *oui* in the 17th c., which suggests that the 18th c. may have been too late for *nenni* to successfully widen its distribution. A further indication that *nenni* is, by this time, being pushed out of its former functional slot by *non* is the fact that *nenni* in the 18th-c. texts typically seems to express a more emphatic form of negation than previously, and is often accompanied by a (non-subordinating) emphatic *que* even in direct discourse, as seen in (78) below. This is suggestive of a push-chain (Martinet 1952), whereby the encroachment of *non* initially causes *nenni* to attempt to cultivate a new functional territory, and subsequently to more or less disappear from the language altogether.

- (78) *...parlez, dit-il, si vous osez, est-ce que j'ai fait le libertin comme vous ? Oh que nenni, répondit De Grèves, vous êtes un saint ; (J. de Varenne, Mémoires du chevalier de Ravanne, 1740, pp. 138-140)*
 '...speak, he said, if you dare, have I been a libertine like you? – Oh heavens, no, answered De Grèves, you're a saint;'

As for *si*, it continues to be found exclusively with a following verb in my data until the second half of the 17th c. (although, as mentioned earlier, Pohl (1976: 204) notes that bare *si*

is first attested appr. one hundred years before that). Tokens of *si* followed by a verb continue to be found well into the 20th c.; from the 17th c. onwards, however, the verb is no longer anaphoric, but is invariably the 3ps present indicative of the pro-verb *faire* ('do'), such that we may consider the collocation *si fait* as, in effect, having already been lexicalized as a response particle, even though that particle is gradually reduced to the bare *si*.

The second principal finding of this study is that, in the Medieval data, *oil* and *nenil* are rarely used to respond to questions whose pragmatic orientation is, so to speak, in disharmony with the chosen particle. That is to say that, independently of the semantic polarity of the preceding question (cf. Figure 3), *oil* is preferentially used in response to questions that are positively oriented, or without a clear orientation, whereas *nenil* prefers questions that have either a negative orientation or no clear orientation at all. As shown in Figure 4, this pragmatic preference is particularly evident in the case of *oil*, as indeed of the modern form *oui*, as well.

In contrast, prior to the 17th c., *non* is typically used to respond to utterances that are pragmatically "disharmonious", i.e. utterances that have a positive or no clear orientation. The same is true of *si* (in this case, almost by definition, given that only instances of *si* used in its post-16th c., reversing, sense were retained for analysis), which to this day almost exclusively responds to utterances that are negatively oriented.

Figure 3: Percentage of preceding utterances with the same polarity as the response particle

Figure 4: Percentage of pragmatically harmonious uses of the French response particles

In other words, throughout the history of the French language, rather than positive affirmation, *oïl/oui* has been used principally to express interpersonal agreement with the previous speaker. In the Medieval and Renaissance periods, *nenil* was similarly used to express interpersonal agreement with negatively-oriented utterances, but in this case, the pattern changed as the marker came into competition with *non* and gradually became obsolete. In contrast, Medieval/Renaissance *non*, on the other hand, was to a large extent a marker of interpersonal disagreement. As in the case of *nenni*, that has changed, the modern *non* being roughly equally capable of expressing agreement and disagreement. Given that, as we saw above, *non* also came to constitute an equally felicitous response to both interrogative and non-interrogative speech acts from the 17th c. onwards, the need for two different negative response particles diminished, and as a result, *nenni* has all but disappeared from standard usage.

Si, finally, was originally a marker of strong affirmation: Recall that Medieval/Renaissance *si* was capable of expressing confirmation of a preceding positive utterance (exemplified in (67), sect. 5.1 above), as well as reversal of a preceding negative one. However, as the remit of *oui* was extended beyond answering questions, the confirmatory use of *si* in response to assertions or requests must have come to be perceived as redundant, given that it no longer contrasted with similar uses of *oui*. This would explain why, from the 17th c. onwards, the use of *si* essentially became restricted to responses that reverse the negative polarity of the preceding utterance. Interestingly, the particle also appears to become more typically used in contexts like (79) below, where there is overt interpersonal disagreement between two interlocutors, thus distinguishing itself even further from *oui*:

- (79) Elise. *Cela ne sera pas, mon père.* – Harpagon. *Cela sera, ma fille.* – E. *Non.* – H. *Si.* – E. *Non, vous dis-je.* – H. *Si, vous dis-je.* (Molière, *L'avare*, 1669, pp. 80-82)
 ‘Elise. That will not be, father. – Harpagon. That will be, daughter. – E. No. – H. Yes.
 – E. No, I tell you. – H. Yes, I tell you.’

This seemingly more “polemical” character of post-Renaissance French *si* would account for the observation made by an anonymous reviewer that the multiple tokens of the particle may be used to boost a disagreeing response to an utterance containing a lexical, rather than a

syntactic, negation (cf. note 3, in sect. 4 above), on condition that the responding speaker has previously asserted p:

- (80) A. *Pierre est heureux.* – B. (*Non,*) *Pierre est malheureux.* – A. *Si, si, il est heureux !*
'A. Pierre is happy. – B. (No,) Pierre is unhappy. – A. He is, too, happy! (Lit.: Yes, yes, he's happy!)

6 Conclusion

This study has shown that, while syntax and semantics are both relevant to the use of response particles, in the sense that the semantic notion of polarity is frequently of relevance in so far as it is expressed syntactically in the responded-to utterance, interpersonal pragmatics cannot be left out of the equation, but is rather central to an empirically accurate account of the synchronic distribution of such particles. In addition, the diachronic development of the relevant items is likely to be a crucial component of an explanatory account. In other words, a panchronic, functionalist, and non-modular approach is preferable to one that attempts to explain response-particle usage by an appeal to a single synchronic level of linguistic description.

It has been shown, moreover, that although languages typically possess only a pair or a very small set of conventionalized response particles, which superficially appear to constitute a tightly organized paradigm, that impression may be misleading. Thus, individual particles may, in fact, obey partly different distributional principles. With respect to Modern French, that is most obviously the case with the affirmative particles *oui* and *si*: while the distribution of both items involves considerations of polarity and (dis)agreement, polarity seems to be the main parameter in the case of *si*, whereas *oui* is more strongly geared towards the expression of interpersonal agreement. Thus, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the felicitous use of *si* requires a preceding utterance that is syntactically negative, and whose polarity is then invariably reversed through the use of *si*. In the relatively rare cases where the particle is used to respond to an utterance that is not syntactically negative, that utterance must implicate a negatively polar proposition, as illustrated in (43), sect. 4, or it must contradict (and thus semantically imply the negation of) a preceding syntactically positive statement made by the speaker who produces *si* (as in (80) above). *Oui*, on the other hand, can express interpersonal agreement with the pragmatic orientation of a preceding utterance largely independently of the polarity of that utterance. This discrepancy not only throws further doubt on the explanatory power of the notion of synchronic functional paradigms (a subject discussed at some length by Hansen 2008, 2011, 2014), but also – as discussed in section 4 – on the strict applicability of the concept of markedness to describe relations among superficially similar items such as response particles.

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Data bases

Corpus CLAPI: http://clapi.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/V3_Accueil.php?interface_langue=FR

Frantext: <http://www.frantext.fr/>

Perseus Digital Library : <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>

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