‘Negation’ and CHECK moves in the Shetland dialect of Scots

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Introduction

• Shetland dialect has a particle, –n, which seems to be available in some constructions with interrogative syntax

(1) *Im’n I taald ye stories oot a number, til noo I am.N I told you stories out of number until now I haena een left ta tell! have.NEG one left to tell

"Haven’t I told you so many stories?! So now I haven’t got one left to tell." (Dagmar 1962:25)

• Investigate its syntactic and pragmatic distribution using acceptability judgments

• Give an analysis for –n as a CHECK move, which checks that p is already part of the addressee’s beliefs

• Syntactically positioned in the left periphery (ResponseP)
Canonical questions
Canonical questions

Positive polar questions – Have you seen Titanic?

True negative questions – Have you not seen Titanic either?
Canonical questions

Positive polar questions – Have you seen Titanic?

True negative questions – Have you not seen Titanic either?

Non-canonical questions
Canonical questions

Positive polar questions – Have you seen Titanic?

True negative questions – Have you not seen Titanic either?

Non-canonical questions

Biased

Matrix biased questions:

Haven’t you seen Titanic too?

Tag questions:

You’ve seen Titanic, haven’t you?

Positive polar questions – Have you seen Titanic?

True negative questions – Have you not seen Titanic either?

Non-canonical questions

Biased

Matrix biased questions:

Haven’t you seen Titanic too?

Tag questions:

You’ve seen Titanic, haven’t you?

Rhetorical

Polar rhetorical questions:

Didn’t I tell you it would be easy?

Exclamatives:

Isn’t it wonderful!

SHETLAND DIALECT
Negation in Shetland

• Standard negation markers:
  – *na* and *no*

2. He is *na* coming.
3. He’s *no* coming.
Negation in Shetland

• Standard negation markers:
  – *na* and *no*

2. He is *na* coming.
3. He’s *no* coming.

• – *na* unavailable in constructions with interrogative syntax

• Interrogative constructions are *verb-subject-no*.

4. Can you no come? / *Canna you come?*
5. You can come, can you no? / *You can come, canna you?*
Shetland –*n*

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Interrogatives only?

She widna come. | She wid’n come.
True negative questions?

Do you no like it either? | Do’n you like it either?
DATA
Methodology

• 20 speakers from Shetland
  • 10 aged 18-30
  • 10 aged 55+

• Interview method

• Examples rated on a 1-5 scale

Examples

BQ -- neutral evidential context

a) You are pretty sure that you have seen that I have a driving license [p]. We are going to help a friend to move house, and we’re going to rent a van to do it [Ø]. You say:

  Can’n you drive?

  Can you no drive?
Examples

BQ -- negative evidential context

b) We have organised a retirement party for someone we work with. I was meant to buy a gift \([p]\) but on the day of the party, when you ask me where the present is, I say 'what present?' \([\neg p]\). You say:

Did you no buy the present?

Did’n you buy the present?
Results – matrix BQs

Can she no come? | Wid’n she come? | Can’n she come?

BQ, 18-30

BQ, 55+

SCORE

NEUT  NEG

NEUT  NEG

NG | N.LOCAL | N.OTHER

NG | N.LOCAL | N.OTHER
Can’t in matrix BQs
Results – positive anchor TQs

She can come, can she no? | She would come, wid’n she? | She can come, can’n she?

![Graphs showing score comparisons between neutral (NEUT) and negative (NEG) contexts for TQs 18-30 and TQs 55+ under different conditions: NO, N.LOCAL, N.OTHER.](image-url)
Results – RQs + exclamatives

Did I no tell you it would be easy?!  
Did’n I tell you it would be easy?!  
Wis it no a lovely day!  
Wis’n it a lovely day!
Summary of $-n$ distribution

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>18-30</th>
<th>55+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NEG Q</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BQ</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>?/✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQ (neg)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQ (neut)</td>
<td>✓✓</td>
<td>✓✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXCL</td>
<td>✓✓</td>
<td>✓✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>POLAR RQ</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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Further evidence of change

(6) *Can’n we no aa come in?*
   can.N we NEG all come in
   ‘Can’t we all come in?’
   (Robertson & Graham 1952:10)

(7) *Do’n they no have a bakery in Waas?*
   do.N they NEG have a bakery in Walls
   ‘Don’t they have a bakery in Walls?’
   (attested, 04/07/17)

(8) *It must be three year since I left there, is’n it no?*
   it must be three years since I left there is.N it NEG
   ‘It must be three years since I left there, isn’t it?’
   (attested, 23/01/16)
Results - $\neg n + no$
ANALYSIS
–$n$: characteristics

- Tag questions, exclamatives, polar rhetorical questions

Shared characteristics:

- Speaker’s epistemic belief = $p$
- Evidence = $p$ or $\emptyset$
–n: characteristics

- Tag questions, exclamatives, polar rhetorical questions

Shared characteristics:

- Speaker’s epistemic belief = p
- Evidence = p or Ø
- Speaker’s perception of addressee’s epistemic belief = p

(see also Gunlogson 2008)
Commitment revision

• In all three constructions, the speaker is able to take full responsibility for $p$ in the discourse.

(9)  
S: He can come, can’t he.
A: I don’t know.
S: Well, he can.
Commitment revision

• In all three constructions, the speaker is able to take full responsibility for $p$ in the discourse.

(9)  S:  He can come, can't he.
     A:  I don't know.
     S:  Well, he can.

(10) S:  And that cake! Wasn't it good!
       A:  I don't know.
       S:  Well, it was.
Commitment revision

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(10) S: And that cake! Wasn’t it good!
     A: I don’t know.
      S: Well, it was.

(11) S: Cheer up! Can’t you still win the last one?!
     A: I don’t know.
     S: Well, you said you could earlier.
       Well, you can.
       Well, I think you can.
Commitment revision in BQs

• The same principles do not apply to matrix biased questions.

(12) \textit{S thinks their friend J will be coming to the party tonight. However, S then notices on Facebook that J has clicked attending on a different event that is taking place at the same time.}

\textbf{S}: Isn’t she coming?
\textbf{A}: I don’t know.
\textbf{S}: #Well, she is.
    #I think she is.
    I thought she was.
Commitment revision in BQs

• The same principles do not apply to matrix biased questions.

(12) *S* thinks *their* friend *J* will be coming to the party tonight. However, *S* then notices on Facebook that *J* has clicked attending on a different event that is taking place at the same time.

*S:* Isn’t she coming?
*A:* I don’t know.
*S:* #Well, she is.
    #I think she is.
    I thought she was.

(13) *S* has got some spare tickets to a concert. *S* thinks *their* friend *H* already has a ticket, but wants to check with *A*.

*S:* Hasn’t he already got a ticket?
*A:* I don’t know.
*S:* #Well, he has.
    I think he has.
    #I thought he had.
–n as a CHECK move

• At-issue / not-at-issue distinction (Potts 2005)

at-issue: p
–n as a CHECK move

• At-issue / not-at-issue distinction (Potts 2005)

at-issue: \( p \)

• Not-at-issue = CG management

CG-management:

\[ \lambda p . \forall w' \in \text{Epi}_{\text{Spkr}}(w)[\forall w'' \in \text{Epi}_{\text{Adr}}(w')[p \in w'']] \]
Syntactic analysis

- $n$ does not have any inherently negative meaning
- Does not seem to be generated in NegP position
Syntactic analysis

• –n does not have any inherently negative meaning

• Does not seem to be generated in NegP position

• Semantic role has connections to discourse particles, confirmational tags (e.g. right, eh, huh)

• Wiltschko & Heim (2016) – syntax for confirmationals
Syntax for $-n$

She can come, can’n she?
Negative anchors?

• If checking that $p$ is part of A’s beliefs – how does this interact with tag questions that have negative anchors?
Negative anchors?

• If checking that \( p \) is part of A’s beliefs – how does this interact with tag questions that have negative anchors?

• Testing three types of construction, in both negative and neutral evidential contexts:

  a) She canna come, can she?
  b) She canna come, can’n she?
  c) She canna come, can’n she no?
Results – negative anchor TQs

She canna come, can she? | She canna come, can’ n she? | She canna come, can’ n she no?
–n + no: VP-ellipsis

• Tag questions as VP-ellipsis constructions (Sailor 2011)

11. She can come, \([_{\text{RespP}} \text{can’}_i \ [_{\text{TP}} \text{she}_j \ [_{\text{T}} \text{t}_i \ [_{\text{VP}} \text{t}_j \text{come}]]]]\)
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11. She can come, $[\text{RespP} \text{can'}n_i [\text{TP} \text{she}_j [\text{T} t_i [\text{VP}_j \text{come}]]]]$

- When there is a negative anchor, speakers need to CHECK the negative proposition.

12. She canna come, $[\text{RespP} \text{can'}n_i [\text{TP} \text{she}_j [\text{T} t_i [\text{NegP} \text{no [VP}_j \text{come}]]]]]]$
She canna come, can’n she no?
Conclusions

• I presented the results of grammaticality judgments from Shetland dialect exploring the distribution of –n, not previously discussed in the literature.

• –n appears to be undergoing change from a marker that can be used in non-canonical questions, to one with a more specific purpose.

• I analysed –n as a CHECK move, in which the speaker checks that p is already part of the addressee’s beliefs, in ResponseP.

• More central role for addressee beliefs in speaker’s choice of interrogative construction, building on Gunlogson (2008).
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