

‘Short answers’ or ‘emphatic response tags’?

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The grammar of any language is a multi-faceted thing: there are areas which do not involve semantic meaning (for example, the position of adverbs in English sentences) but are simply a matter of conformity; there are areas where meaning is central (for example, the ways in which speakers can refer to future time and give a different view of future events); and there are areas where the choice to use a particular structure (or not) affects the pragmatics of a conversation.

For the last of these areas, a very well-known example in the English language is ‘question tags’. Few people (if any) would dispute that there is a difference between these two utterances:

[1a] ‘Is she French?’

[1b] ‘She’s French, isn’t she?’

On the surface, they have the same semantic meaning – ‘I wish to know if the woman we are talking about is French or not’. But the pragmatics are different: [1a] is a straight request for information, but [1b] is basically a request for confirmation of what the speaker already believes to be true. Well, this is something teachers already know, of course.

But there is another area of English grammar which is very similar, and that is the area known as ‘short answers’. (This is an unfortunate misnomer, as we’ll see below.) Let’s look at some examples of ‘short answers’, based on the example above:

[2a] A: ‘Is she French?’ B: ‘Yes.’

[2b] A: ‘Is she French?’ B: ‘Yes, she’s from Paris.’

[2c] A: ‘Is she French?’ B: ‘Yes, she is. She’s from Paris.’

[2d] A: ‘She isn’t French.’ B: ‘Yes she is! She’s from Paris.’

The first answer, [2a], is the true ‘short answer’, of course – and it would probably be considered very direct, if not rude, if nothing else were said (this though would depend quite a lot on the intonation used). [2b]

illustrates something that is, of course, enormously common in conversation: a reply to the request for information (here, 'Yes') with an immediate follow-up (in this case, the fact that the person is from Paris). But here it is [2c] that is of most interest: is it or is it not the same as [2b]? I would argue that it isn't: the use of 'Yes, she is' in [2b] is to be extremely clear, indeed emphatic.

And this is the 'pragmatic function' of what are traditionally called 'short answers' – they are used to be very clear and emphatic. In this way they are not standard – speakers of English do not reply to each and every question, by any means, with a 'short answer'. But if we look at the majority of language teaching materials, the idea comes across that these 'short answers' are a standard reply – there is very little to be found suggesting to learners that if you reply to a question with 'Yes, I am' or 'No, he didn't' (or whatever), your answer conveys a fair degree of emphasis.

The emphatic nature of these utterances comes across also with example [2d] above: A makes a statement that B believes to be wrong, and so B emphatically corrects A with, initially 'Yes she is!' (It isn't by chance that in this example there is no comma after the word 'yes' – the rising intonation is quite different from the falling intonation pattern of [2c].) Notice that now we have 'Yes she is' and a response to a statement, not to a question – and so we see that so-called 'short answers' are not only not very short, they are often not answers either! I think that utterances like 'No, I'm not' / 'Yes, they did' (etc.) would be better named 'response tags', or indeed 'emphatic response tags'. They are 'tags' in the sense that they are added on to the Yes or No, and they serve to respond emphatically to a question or statement.

But, as Shakespeare said, 'What's in a name?' The important point here is that learners need to know that if they use 'short answers', they will have a certain effect – and that if they use them all the time, they'll sound

very odd to the people they're talking to. Just imagine if we taught our learners always to use 'question tags' and never to ask straightforward questions – almost unthinkable, isn't it? And yet this is similar to practices which encourage (or require) learners to engage in exchanges like 'Do you like pizza?' 'Yes, I do. Do you like hamburgers?' 'No, I don't'(etc.) as if they were straightforward and standard responses. This is pretty dangerous, I think – as Lewis (1993:151) points out:

“ ... 'grammar practice' which violates the nature of language itself cannot be doing what it claims to do – namely develop the student's language skills.”

I have always assumed that 'short answers' get included and practised so much in coursebooks because in this way, learners can be given practice in the auxiliary system – an aspect of English grammar which is as difficult for learners as it is central to how English operates. But then two thoughts occur: a) surely learners get enough practice with auxiliaries by asking questions and forming negatives; and b) surely we can get learners to use 'short answers' in a realistic way, can't we? We might, for example, give them statements which they know to be untrue and ask them to contradict them, for example:

A: 'New York is the capital of the USA.'

B: 'No it isn't – Washington's the capital.'

(Notice the important bit after the 'response tag' – follow-ups are really, really important in language use!) And then, perhaps, give learners opinions that they can agree or disagree with, e.g.:

A: 'Beckham's a great footballer.'

B: 'Yes, he's excellent.' / 'No he isn't – he's awful.' (etc.)

This is hardly stunning, or even very innovative – but it does, I believe, take learners towards grammar practice which reflects language use, as any grammar practice ideally should. Such thoughts are mostly, I believe, of importance for materials writers and publishers, but of course

the more teachers can be aware of how language works, and be critical of materials and activities that do not reflect this, the better.

Reference:

Lewis, M. (1993) *The Lexical Approach* Hove: Language Teaching Publications.