Yes/No Questions

Introduction

In this chapter, we begin our treatment of questions in English. English speakers have a profusion of question types available. Here are some of them.

Question Type	Example
1. *Yes/no* question (sometimes called a *polar question*)	Is dinner ready yet?
2. Statement-form question (statement syntax accompanied by rising intonation)	You come from Texas?
3. Negative *yes/no* question	Shouldn't we send a card?
4. Focused question (with a stressed element)	Was it Nicóle who won the Oscar?
5. *Wh*-question (which typically uses a *wh*-question word—e.g., *who*, *what*, *where*—to seek specific information)	What movie is playing downtown?
6. Negative *wh*-question	Why doesn't he stop barking?
7. Question tag, negative tag	Traffic is heavy at this time of day, isn't it?
8. Question tag, affirmative tag	You didn't go, did you?
9. Alternative question (also called a *choice question*; it has a special intonation contour)	Would you rather live in the city or the country?
10. Rhetorical "question"	Haven't we had enough conflict?
11. Exclamatory "question"	Are you kidding!
12. Indirect question	I wonder if we should start.

Of course, it is questionable to call all of these *questions* in the interrogative mood sense of asking someone something. Certainly, there are questions that don't seek information, and there are statements that do (de Ruiter, 2012). To prove this point and to deal with this assortment of question types, we will spread our coverage over three chapters. The first four types will be dealt with in this chapter; types 5 and 6 will be covered in Chapter 13; types 7–11 will be handled in Chapter 14; and type 12 will not be discussed much until Chapter 33, when we take up other forms of indirect or reported speech. We begin with question type 1.

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Many of the world's languages form *yes/no* questions simply by adding rising intonation to declarative statements. English speakers do this, too (see type 2), but the unmarked form of an English *yes/no* question, like (1), requires rising intonation and a different word order from a statement—one that inverts the subject and the operator. Only a few languages other than English use a word order different from that of statements in making questions—German, for example; on the whole, most languages do not do so. Instead, as Ultan (1978) reports in a typological study of 79 languages from various language families, most languages simply use a distinctive intonation pattern for questions. The second most popular option among the languages Ultan studied was the addition of a special interrogative particle to either the beginning or end of the question or attached directly to a word that is being queried. Here is a Chinese example from Zhu and Wu (2011, p. 634):

ta shangxue + ma
He go school + question particle
'Does/did he go to school?'

At an early stage in the history of English, questions were made with the use of rising intonation alone. Only much later did inversion come about in question formation. The earliest form of this inversion was with the subject and the main verb:

Know you the way to Ipswich?

It took much longer for the rule requiring subject and operator inversion to become standard.

Todeva (1991) has pointed out the parallelism between the evolution of the English language and the acquisition of English as either a first or second language: learners of English are known to first use rising intonation; only after several more stages do they master inversion. The following is a somewhat modified developmental pattern for untutored learners that we have adapted from Pienemann, Johnston, and Brindley (1988) (as reported in Ortega, 2009, p. 35):

Stage	Example
I: Fragments + rising intonation	A hat?
II: Statements + rising intonation	You are tired?
III: Place question marker in front of statement	Is your daughter work here?
IV: *Be* inversion	Are you listening me?
V: *Do* support	Do you like ice cream?
VI: Other question types	Don't you see? I wonder why they left.

Of course, as with all second language (L2) data, these stages are not discrete, and within each there is certainly individual variation. Also, from early on, learners make considerable use of formulaic questions, such as "How are you?" Nonetheless, it can generally be said that inversion is the initial learning challenge for learners, and its mastery takes a while. The challenge is no doubt made more difficult by the fact that English speakers frequently do not use inverted questions in conversations; hence, the exemplars to which ESL/EFL learners are exposed are inconsistent with regard to inversion. We return to this point later in this chapter.

As different as English question formation is from Chinese, Zhu and Wu (2011) observe that it is not necessarily the structural differences that cause learners difficulty. What is problematic is the assumption that learners already know how questions function. For instance, an apparently straightforward teacher question—*Any questions?*—can be multifunctional (Waring, 2012). Even more dubious is the assumption that learners know how to respond

to questions. Replying is not as straightforward as it may seem. This is a problem, given that it is well known that early interactions between learners and speakers of English are replete with questions directed to the learners for the purpose of comprehension checks and clarification requests, and these questions are adjusted to enhance learners' comprehension, which sometimes results in ungrammatical input (Long, 1981).

In this chapter, we begin by examining the inversion rule in English under the heading of form. Other comments about form are directed to the intonation pattern of *yes/no* questions and to the structure of short answers. In order to help teachers guide students on how to respond to questions, we also comment on the meaning of *yes/no* questions and their variations. In the section on use, we make some observations about short answers to *yes/no* questions. We also discuss contraction in negative questions and the use of elliptical questions, questions that take less than full form. We conclude this chapter by pointing out other functions that *yes/no* questions can fulfill, not only in informal language use, but also in academic language.

The Form of *Yes/No* Questions

Yes/no questions are often defined as questions for which either "Yes" or "No" is the expected answer:[1]

Are you going to the party?
- **Yes (I am).**
- **No (I'm not).**

Inverting the subject and operator gives rise to the characteristic syntactic form of *yes/no* questions in English

SUBJECT-OPERATOR INVERSION

With an Auxiliary Verb

Consider the following questions:

1. Will they be in Reno on Friday?

2. Was she able to finish in time?

3. Has Maricor gone home?

4. Are you doing anything tomorrow?

Here is the tree for the first sentence:
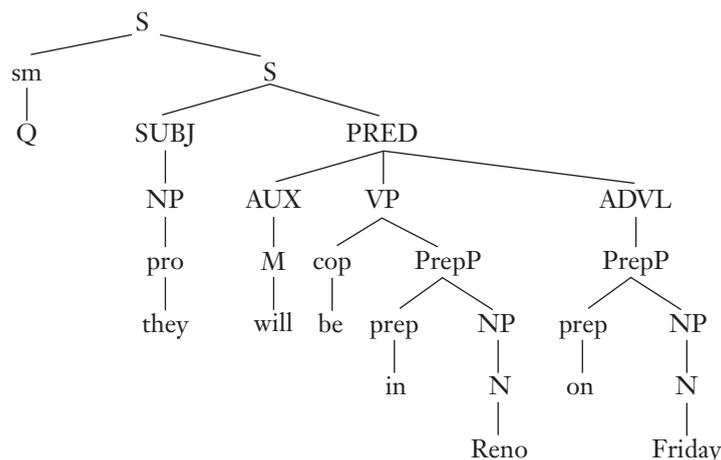
The Q marker is treated as a sentence marker because its scope applies to the whole sentence. Subject-operator inversion inverts the subject with the auxiliary verb *will:*
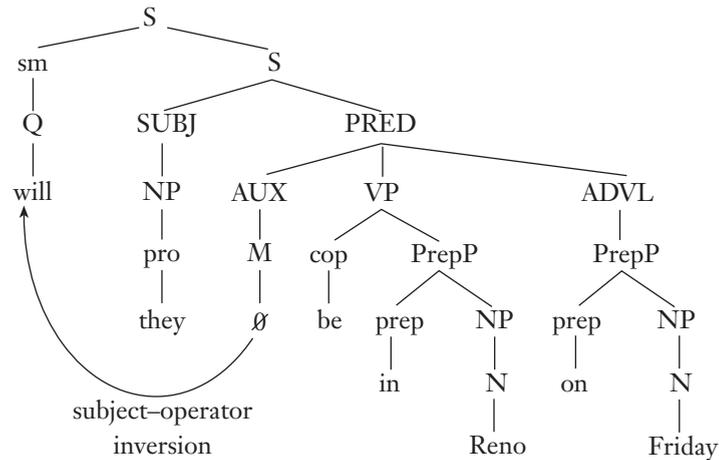
Notice that if this sentence had two auxiliary verbs—for example, if we were to add *be + ing* to the *will* in question (1)—the operator is only the *first* auxiliary verb in the auxiliary string

Will they be gambling in Reno on Friday?

that is inverted with the subject. Furthermore, when the auxiliary has more than one element, as it does with the phrasal modal in question (2), it is only the *first* of the elements in the first auxiliary verb (again the operator) which, along with the tense marker (if there is one) is inverted with the subject. Here are the trees for question (2) as an illustration of this last point:
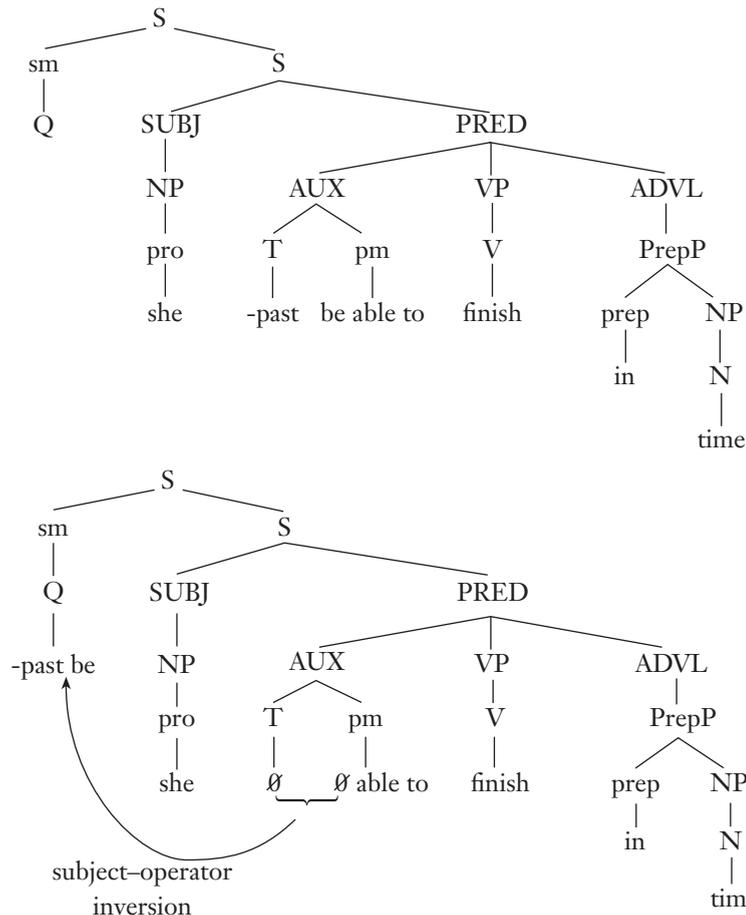
With the Be *Copula*

As you saw in the previous chapter on negation, the negative particle *not* (a sentential adverb) is placed after the first auxiliary verb. In this chapter, we see that it is also the first auxiliary verb that is involved in question formation. Similarly, just as the *not* follows the *be* copula verb when no auxiliary verb is present in negative sentences, so does the *be* copula verb serve as the inverted operator when no auxiliary verb is present in *yes/no* question formation:

Pamela was a new student at the time.
Was Pamela a new student at the time?
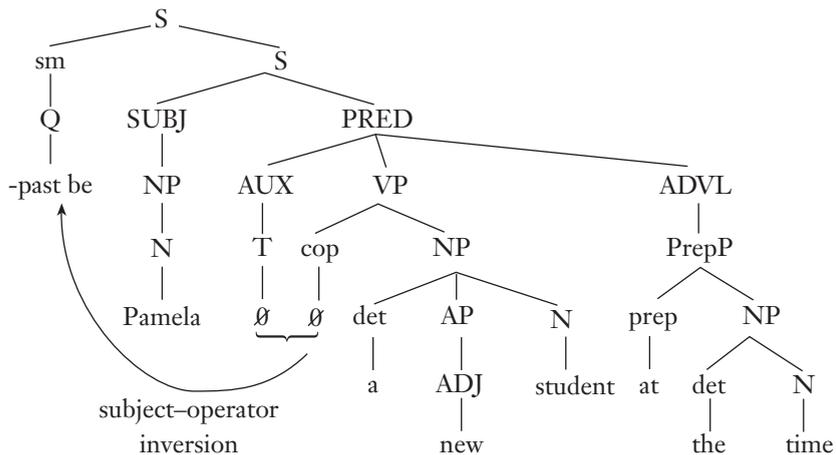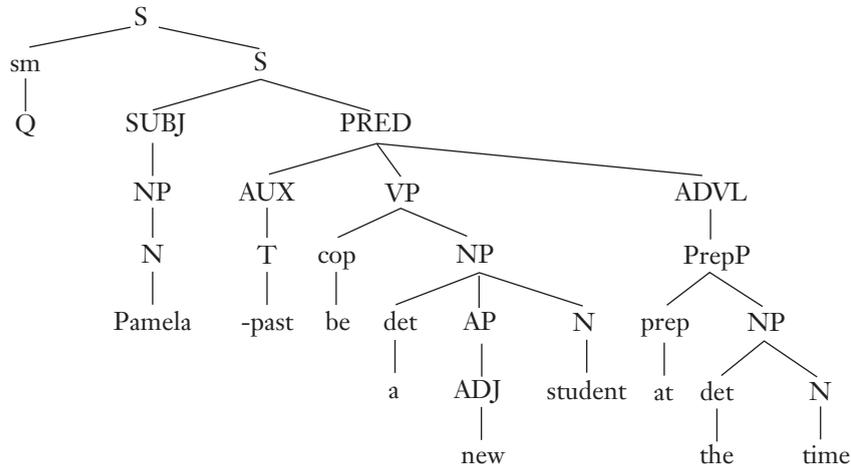
With Other Verbs

When a sentence has no auxiliary or *be* verb, a different condition occurs. Notice that we cannot simply invert the subject and the verb, as we did with the *be* verb, to form a grammatical question:

Arlene plays the organ on Sunday.
*Plays Arlene the organ on Sunday?

Although, as we have already noted, such forms were acceptable in historically earlier forms of English, and their equivalents are grammatical in certain languages today (such as German and the Scandinavian languages), the main verb in the sentence is not inverted with the subject in Modern English.[2]

Once again, we can point to the parallelism between negation and *yes/no* question formation. Recall that to make a sentence negative when it has no auxiliary verb or *be* copula, the operator *do* is inserted. Likewise, in *yes/no* question formation, *do* is added to function as an operator when there is no auxiliary verb or *be* copula verb to invert with the subject:

Do support is also needed for a few phrasal modals:

used to: **Did you use to go skiing when you lived in Vermont?**

have to: **Does Brent have to work on weekends?**

In most cases, however, the first element in phrasal modals is the operator, which inverts with the subject when subject-operator inversion is applied:

be to: **Are you to report tomorrow?**

In sum, whether or not you use explicit terminology with your ESL/EFL students, they need to understand that in a *yes/no* question, the first auxiliary verb in the sentence should appear before the subject. If there is no auxiliary verb, the *be* copula should be used before the subject. If there is no auxiliary verb or *be* copula, then *do* must be introduced at the beginning of the question and must mark the tense of the question.

INTONATION IN *YES/NO* QUESTIONS

In addition to inverted word order and sometimes the addition of the *do* operator, English also uses intonation to mark *yes/no* questions. *Yes/no* questions typically display a raised, nonterminal intonation.[3] To understand how this is articulated, consider that statement intonation in English usually rises on the last stressed syllable of the last content word and then falls on that word in the sentence. For example:

②   ③ ①
Mike is learning to use a computer.

Unmarked *yes/no* question intonation typically rises through the same stressed syllable and then stays high, what is called a "low rise contour" (Hedberg, Sosa, & Görgülü, to appear):

②   ③ ③
Is Mike learning to use a computer?

We must quickly qualify this analysis, however. Couper-Kuhlen (2012) convincingly argues that the intonation of questions depends on the local interaction and the nature of the communicative activity. For instance, in her data from radio broadcasts, a higher proportion of *yes/no* questions with rising intonation is used when conversational topics are being introduced. Later, as the topics are being elaborated upon, more questions with falling intonation are used, although they are still the minority. An additional factor is the epistemic stance reflected in the question. For instance, if the questioner expects a positive response, then he or she may well use a falling intonation rather than a rising one. All of this indicates (as we stated in Chapter 1) that as with all decontextualized rules, they may well be useful as "rules of thumb," but they may not hold up in dynamic interactions.

SHORT ANSWERS TO *YES/NO* QUESTIONS

It is unlikely that the response to a *yes/no* question will be in the form of a full sentence:

Is Ramón an engineering student?

Yes. $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textbf{He is} \\ \textbf{He's} \end{array} \right\}$ **an engineering student.**

No. He isn't an engineering student.

Although these answers are possible, such complete replies may give the listener the impression that the speaker is annoyed by the question. ESL/EFL teachers should be aware of the possible negativity expressed by a full-sentence answer to a *yes/no* question and not always insist on their students answering questions with full sentences, as teachers

sometimes do. A more common form of answer, although this too is restricted in its distribution (as you will see in the section on use later in this chapter), is the short answer:

Is Ramón an engineering student? ⎰ **Yes, he is.**
⎱ **No, he isn't.**

If the *yes/no* question begins with the copula *be*, as in our example sentence, the short answer is formed with the same form of the *be* verb that appears in the question. Notice that *be* cannot be contracted in an affirmative short answer. All affirmative short answers must be followed by at least one other word, or else the full form of *be* must be used:

*Yes, he's.
Yes, he's studying electrical engineering.
Yes, he is.

When the *yes/no* question contains an auxiliary verb, that operator is used in the short answer.

With a modal	**Can she go?**	**Yes, she can.** / **No, she can't.**
With a phrasal modal (the first element)	**Is she able to go?**	**Yes, she is.** / **No, she isn't.**
With perfect aspect	**Has she gone?**	**Yes, she has.** / **No, she hasn't.**
With progressive aspect	**Is she going?**	**Yes, she is.** / **No, she isn't.**

If the sentence contains more than one auxiliary verb, the short answer may also contain an auxiliary verb in addition to the operator, although when the second or third auxiliary verb is some form of *be*, the speaker usually omits it; for example,

| With modal and perfect | **Will she have gone?** | **Yes, she will have.** / **No, she won't have.** |

(often pronounced with the "have" reduced to /əv/)

| With modal, perfect, and progressive | **Will she have been worrying?** | **Yes, she will have (been).** / **No, she won't have (been).** |

If *do* is the operator in the question, it is also used in the short answer with the same tense used in the question:

Does she go there often? ⎰ **Yes, she does.**
⎱ **No, she doesn't.**

The Meaning of *Yes/No* Questions

Although not all linguists agree (cf. Bolinger, 1978), most feel that an acceptable paraphrase of a *yes/no* question might be *Is it the case that…?*, in which the speaker is asking for confirmation or denial of a proposition. Such an analysis implies that *yes/no* questions are neutral questions—that is, there is no expectation regarding whether an affirmative or negative reply is likely. Chalker (1984), for example, calls them "open questions" because the speaker has an open mind about the answer. However, there are morphosyntactic and/or phonological variations of such open questions, which *are* influenced by the speaker's expectations. Such is the case with negative *yes/no* questions.

NEGATIVE *YES/NO* QUESTIONS

Negative *yes/no* questions have a different orientation. In the following contrast,

> **Is Josh playing soccer this year?**
> **Isn't Josh playing soccer this year?**

the first question is neutral with regard to speaker expectations, but the negative question signals that the speaker has reason to believe that something he or she had previously thought was true might not be so. Here, in using the negative question, the speaker is signaling that he or she expected that Josh would be playing soccer but, because of new evidence, now realizes that this may not be true. The speaker may be hoping for a positive answer but not really expecting one. Because the prior expectation tends to be aligned with the speaker's wishes, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) add that negative questions can express disappointment or annoyance because the speaker's earlier wishes or expectations now seem not to be true any longer:

> **Aren't we going to the movies?** (I thought we had planned to.)
> **Didn't you say that the test would be next week?** (I thought that was what you had announced.)

Heritage's (2002) study of news interviews finds that interviewers' negative questions are posed "under the auspices of an ideology of 'neutrality,'" (p. 1430), but in reality allow for the interviewer to project an expected answer. Here is an example, adapted from Heritage, from a presidential press conference on March 7, 1997, which took place between President Bill Clinton and reporter Helen Thomas of UPI (2002, p. 1432):

> *Thomas:* **Mister President, in your zeal for funds during the last campaign, didn't you put the Vice President and Maggie and all the others in your administration top side in a very vulnerable position,**
>
> *Clinton:* **I disagree with that. How are we vulnerable because...**

President Clinton voices disagreement with Thomas's question, indicating that he interprets it not as a request for information so much as an assertion, which he rejects. Admittedly, press conferences tend to be more confrontational than ordinary interactions, but Heritage (2002) notes that in his data, such responses are recurrent in both British and American English.

While not all negative questions are posed in an aggressive manner, responding to them can create semantic problems for many ESL/EFL learners (Bevington, 1979). For example, native speakers of most Asian and West African languages react to a negative *yes/no* question in a literal manner in their own language—they agree or disagree with its form:

> **Don't you have bananas?** { **Yes (we have no bananas).**
> **No (we have bananas).**

Speakers of English, on the other hand, react to negative *yes/no* questions as if they were affirmative ones; i.e., as if they were disagreeing or agreeing with an implicit assertion:

> **Don't you have bananas?** { **Yes (we do).**
> **No (we don't).**

While negative questions are not all that frequent in normal conversation, the miscommunication that results from not understanding the underlying expectation may warrant teaching ESL/EFL students how to reply to them. We should also mention that

Koshik (2002) showed that teachers' questions do not have to be overtly marked as negative to be interpreted as such. For instance, a teacher's positive polarity question during a writing conference with a student can be construed as a negative assertion; e.g., *Is this the best way to start your paper?* Presumably, this "reverse polarity assertion" occurs elsewhere as well.

FOCUSED *YES/NO* QUESTIONS

So far we have been considering *yes/no* questions where the whole state, activity, or event is being queried. Sometimes, however, *yes/no* questions can be more focused. A proposition may be thought to be true in general, but one of its specific components—subject, verb, object, adverbial—may be still in doubt. The uncertain element is then queried in a focused way. Consider, for example, the following questions, where contrastive stress is used to mark the focused elements (Givón, 1993, pp. 247–248). Unlike unmarked *yes/no* questions, which are open with regard to overall expectation, a focused question places an indeterminate element in the focused position through the use of contrastive stress:

> **Did *Megan* play a practical joke on Pat?** (or did *someone else*?)
> **Did Megan *play* a practical joke on Pat?** (or only *plan* one?)
> **Did Megan play *a practical joke* on Pat?** (or did she play *something else,* such as a trick?)
> **Did Megan play a practical joke *on Pat*?** (or was it played *on someone else*?)

When an optional adverbial is present in the question, unless contrastive stress indicates otherwise, the adverbial automatically attracts and focuses attention in *yes/no* questions because of its final position in the clause. Thus, the following focused questions query the adverbial:

> **Did Megan play a trick on Pat *deliberately*?** ⎰ (or was it an *accident*?)
> ⎱ (*or did she not do it?)

> **Did Megan play a trick on Pat *last Sunday*?** ⎰ (or was it on *Monday*?)
> ⎱ (*or did she not do it?)

> **Did Megan play a trick on Pat *at the mall*?** ⎰ (or was it *somewhere else*?)
> ⎱ (*or did she not do it?)

That the interrogative focus is attracted to optional constituents is further supported by the fact that when an optional adverbial is present, stressing the optional adverbial is natural. In contrast, stressing another constituent in the clause is odd:

> **Did Megan play a trick on Pat *deliberately*?** (or was it an accident?)
> **?Did *Megan* play a trick on Pat deliberately?** (or did someone else do it deliberately?)

STATEMENT-FORM QUESTIONS

Subject-operator inversion does not always take place. In fact, uninverted statement-form questions, marked simply with rising intonation, are common (Stivers, 2010). This type of question is marked in the sense that the speaker who poses the question is anticipating confirmation:

> **A: I just got back from San Francisco.**
> **B: You had a good time there?** (expecting confirmation)

B's reply with accompanying rising question intonation suggests that B's hunch was that the answer would be "Yes." Had B chosen instead to use the unmarked, neutral, inverted question, we might assume that B had no expectation about what A's reply would be:

A: **I just got back from San Francisco.**
B: **Did you have a good time?** (uncertain expectation)

In addition, a negative uninverted question could reflect the fact that new information has just been received that runs counter to an earlier expectation:

(Person A returns home early from a shopping trip)
B: **The stores weren't open late?** (counter to earlier expectation)

A's early return contradicts B's expectation that A would be shopping until later.

Weber (1989) and Williams (1989) both report that uninverted questions are much more common than one might suppose.[4] In her analysis of face-to-face and telephone conversations, Weber found that as many as 41 percent of all the questions in the data were either uninverted, of the sort we have just considered, or nonclausal forms, such as the following (Weber, p. 181):

A: **I've got so much work that I don't believe it, so I'm just not thinking about that.**
B: **In school, you mean?**

In this nonclausal example, B questions with a prepositional phrase plus the clause tag *you mean*. Uninverted forms with rising intonation, with and without tags, serve as comprehension checks, as we see in this example (Williams, 1990).

In addition to comprehension checks, nonclausal questions often function as "next turn repair initiators" (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977, p. 367). In conversation analysis, re*pair* refers to the efforts of participants to deal with trouble in hearing or understanding, and *next turn* indicates that the repair occurs in the conversational turn after the "trouble source" turn. Here is another example from Weber (1989, p. 170):

A: **What's the dark green thing?**
B: **Pardon?**
A: **What's this?**
B: **That's Japanese eggplant.**

In this example, B's production of *pardon*, a next turn repair initiator, displays some trouble with hearing or understanding A's entire question. A recasts her somewhat modified question. This time, its meaning is clear, and B responds to the question. Williams (1989) contributes evidence from her own investigation that full clausal uninverted questions also function as clarification requests.

One variation of a statement-form question is an *echo question*, which simply repeats, or modifies in some minor fashion, a previous utterance with rising intonation. If the intonation is rising, as it is for unmarked *yes/no* questions, then the purpose for using the echo question would simply be to seek confirmation of the preceding speaker's remark:

A: **My sister is going out with Lou.**

B: $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textbf{Your sister is} \\ \textbf{She's} \end{array} \right\}$ **going out with Lou?** (seeking confirmation that the previous remark has been understood)

If, on the other hand, the pitch of the intonation rises beyond the usual range, then the echo question can express counterexpectation—surprise or disbelief (see VanderBrook, Schlue, & Campbell, 1980, for further discussion):

B: **Your sister is going out with Lou?** ② ③ ④

SOME VERSUS *ANY*

The last point in our discussion of the meaning of *yes/no* questions has to do with the use of the determiners *some* and *any*, a contrast that we encountered in the previous chapter on negation. Many ESL/EFL grammar texts say that *any* is used in questions as well as negatives. This is true with regard to open or unmarked questions such as:

Do you have *any* paper I can borrow?

However, we also saw in the chapter on negation that the weakly stressed *some* suggests a positive quantity. It is, therefore, used in questions that in some way expect a positive answer, such as with an offer:

(A waiter to a customer in a restaurant)

***A:* Would you like *some* dessert?** (to encourage the answer "Yes")

Just as we mentioned in our discussion with negatives, we must be cautious, therefore, about what we say about the distribution of *some* and *any*, as they can both occur with different question types, depending on the meaning[5] (partly based on Chalker, 1984, p. 15):

Is there some news?	**(expecting the answer "Yes")**
Is there any news?	**(open or neutral question)**
Isn't there some news?	**(Surely there is.)**
Isn't there any news?	**(I had hoped there would be.)**
Is there no news?	

Many of the issues that we have drawn attention to under the heading of meaning relate to *conducive questions* and words that go with them, questions and words that convey a questioner's expectation or preference for a given answer. One word of caution is in order here. When considering conduciveness, we are dealing with a context-based rather than an absolute notion (Piazza, 2002). As Piazza advises in her study of the pragmatics of such questions in academic discourse, to some extent the use of conducive questions can be accounted for by the asymmetrical power balance in classrooms, where it is customary for instructors to pose questions that have a preferred answer. The fact that we cannot regard the use of conducive questions as purely a semantic matter leads us to a discussion on the use of questions.

Issues of Use Concerning *Yes/No* Questions

Recall that with use, we are attempting to answer the question: when speakers have two or more question forms with the same meaning to choose from, which factors influence their choice—that is, why do they prefer one form over another?

THE USE OF SHORT ANSWERS

Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the form of standard short answers in English (*Yes, it is./No, it isn't.*). While these short-answer forms are worth teaching ESL/EFL students, one should bear in mind that even these forms do not occur frequently as responses to *yes/no* questions. In Richards (1977), replies to *yes/no* questions containing auxiliary or verb repetition made up less than 20 percent of the written corpus and less than 10 percent of the

spoken English corpus. Similarly, in a discourse analysis of speech samples collected from a wide variety of contexts, Winn-Bell Olsen (1980) found that standard short forms were used rather infrequently by English speakers—in fact, only 8 percent of the time—as answers to *yes/no* questions in her data (26 out of 329 instances).

Winn-Bell Olsen (1980) discovered that speakers were much more likely to answer questions with a direct "Yes" (or its colloquial variants—e.g., *Yup*, *Yeah*, *Uh huh*) or a direct "No" (or its variants—e.g., *Nah*, *Nope*, *Uh uh*, *Not yet*), each often followed by some sort of expansion. Indirect affirmations, denials, or hedges (e.g., *Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about this problem? I guess maybe it does.*) accounted for a rather large percentage of the answers as well. Finally, a significant portion of the answers were formulaic sequences of confirmation or denial (e.g., *I doubt it*.). Since 23 out of 26 occurrences of standard short-form answers in her data were found in conversations between strangers or in self-conscious speech, Winn-Bell Olsen hypothesizes that the more distant the relationship between speakers or the more uncomfortable the situation, the more frequently speakers tend to use standard short-form answers.

STATEMENT-FORM *YES/NO* QUESTIONS

The use of uninverted statement-form *yes/no* questions might also be said to relate to issues of social familiarity or distance. Recall that uninverted questions are used when the speaker expects confirmation. Using an uninverted question thus suggests that the person asking the question knows the other person well enough to anticipate the other's answer. Such intimacy often may not exist, and the use of uninverted questions could then appear to be presumptuous:

Worker to supervisor: You're going to the dance?

ESL students have been known to use uninverted questions with their teachers,

You're giving us a quiz on Thursday?

not realizing that their question can be seen to be presumptuous.

ELLIPTICAL QUESTIONS

At some point, teachers may want to teach their intermediate- and advanced-level students about informal *yes/no* questions that occur without an initial operator. Such questions are fairly frequent in informal conversations between speakers and are different from statement-form *yes/no* questions, in that they are used with no expectation or no particular expression of emotion:

(Are) You going to the movies?
(Has) She been feeling better?
(Do) You know Fred Callahan?

If *you* is the subject, it can also be deleted in most cases, along with the operator:

(Do you) Wanna study together?

In such questions, the operator and subject are optionally deletable because they are recoverable from other grammatical and lexical information in the question and from the discourse context. It would probably not be of high priority for your students to practice using such elliptical *yes/no* questions, but they should develop comprehension of this form and perhaps an ability to automatically supply the missing operator or operator and subject.

CONTRACTED VERSUS UNCONTRACTED NEGATIVES IN NEGATIVE QUESTIONS

In English negative *yes/no* questions, the negative may appear in both contracted and uncontracted forms. Only the contracted form, however, may appear sentence-initially as part of an operator:

Isn't it appropriate to ask?

Is it not appropriate to ask?

The question with the uncontracted negative after the subject is more formal than its counterpart with a question-initial contracted negative.

In a usage study, Kontra (1981) has documented the occurrence in contemporary English of uncontracted negative questions such as the following:

Is not linguistics a branch of psychology?

Here, the *not* appears before the subject in its uncontracted form. While such questions do occasionally occur, we view this type of question as a stylistically formal and somewhat archaic vestige of an earlier stage of English. Such a question, Kontra believes, is used when the speaker is inviting the listener to agree with the speaker's assumption that the expressed proposition is self-evidently true. One example he cites is the following excerpt from a discussion in the British Parliament (Kontra, 1993, p. 340):

Is not it an outrage that the Minister has not even tried to answer the question? . . .

Does not the Minister think that he has a duty to tell people the facts before they vote?

This word order would be unusual in North American English.

THE USE OF *AREN'T* AS A GAP-FILLER

A final note on contracted negative *yes/no* questions concerns the lexical gap that occurs in the first person singular. All of the following are acceptable contracted negative questions and short answers:

Isn't he/she/it?	**He/she/it isn't.**
Aren't we/you/they?	**We/you/they aren't.**

However, we cannot contract the verb *be* and the *not* in *I am not* unless we use the nonstandard *I ain't*. What speakers of English do in negative *yes/no* questions (but not in short answers) is to substitute *are* for *am* and contract. Thus:

Aren't I? { **I am not.**
                { **I'm not.**

This illogical gap-filler arose because there were strong social and educational stigmas against the use of *ain't. Aren't I?* is mainly a colloquialism, but it may puzzle ESL/EFL students when they encounter it; so you should be prepared to explain why sometimes *aren't* is used with the first person singular pronoun in negative *yes/no* questions.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

Up to now, we have been dealing with questions whose function is primarily to seek new information or to clarify or confirm given or shared information. *Yes/no* questions can perform a number of other functions, of course. You have already seen in Chapter 8 how questions with modal forms can be used in requests for assistance:

Can I get a ride home with you? (direct request)

As we also saw in the chapter on modals, the past-tense form of *can* softens this a bit:

Could I get a ride home with you? (less direct)

An even more polite form of request uses an embedded question (about which we have more to say in Chapter 33):

I wonder if I could get a ride home with you. (least direct, therefore most polite)

You also saw in Chapter 8 how *yes/no* question forms could be used in making offers or invitations:

Would you like to sit for a while?

They can also be used as directives:

Would you please stand up straight?

as reprimands:

Aren't you a little old to be doing that?

as complaints:

Have you ever stayed home all day with a two-year-old?

and many other functions. Clearly, the function of a *yes/no* question is going to depend on the context and the speaker's intention, but it may also be clear why Heritage (2002) (see also Raymond, 2003) called questions "a form of social action" (p. 1427). Systemic functional linguistics, too, views questions as devices for expressing interpersonal meanings (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2008, p. 1217).

IN WRITTEN ACADEMIC TEXTS

Of course, it is not just in oral discourse that students will encounter questions. According to Thompson (2001), questions in academic texts assign readers and writers roles. Typically, the questioner role is assigned to the reader, and the writer takes on the role of the answerer. Questions are designed to draw readers into a text and to manage the flow of information. Indeed, based on his corpus study, Hyland (2002) ascribes three functions to questions in textbooks: "to frame the discourse (signaling the issues to be dealt with), to organize the text (explicitly introducing new topics and often using metalanguage such as *question* or *topic*), and to set up claims (stimulating thought and anticipating an affirmation)" (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2008, p. 1218).

Conclusion

As we have indicated, a challenge for beginning ESL/EFL students is to learn about inversion in *yes/no* questions—both the syntactic rules and the social conditions in which they are appropriate. Because the *do* operator is not a morpheme with many equivalents in the languages of the world, its use in *yes/no* questions may require some special attention. Students may also need some understanding of how to respond to *yes/no* questions, particularly negative *yes/no* questions. Finally, we should remember that not all *yes/no* questions are inverted. As you have seen in this chapter, many conversational *yes/no* questions are uninverted, elliptical, or nonclausal in form. While you might not specifically teach ESL/EFL students to produce these forms, students may be confused, and you may need to help them comprehend their use.

Teaching Suggestions

1. **Form.** To expose students to *yes/no* questions before they are asked to form them on their own, surveys can be used. Surveys in which students learn something about themselves and their classmates work well. Depending on the ages and backgrounds of your students, you can use various survey themes: for example, health habits (*Do you exercise?*), eating habits (*Do you eat rice for breakfast*?), or learning strategies (*Do you speak English with your friends*?). You can give students a survey form that you have prepared or they can create one with you. They then complete the survey themselves and ask the questions of one or more other students.

2. **Form.** To introduce inversion in sentences containing an auxiliary verb or *be*, you can show students a sentence with each word written out on a card. Then substitute a question-mark card for the period card and move the first auxiliary verb or *be* verb card to sentence-initial position.

JOHN IS WRITING A LETTER . ? **1** **2**

THE CHILDREN ARE NOISY . ? **1** **2**
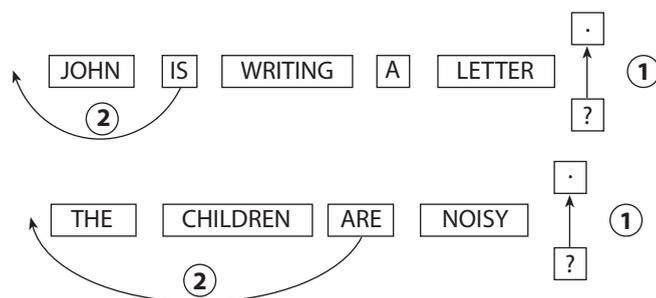
Later, in order to introduce students to the formation of *yes/no* questions without an auxiliary verb or *be*, you will need to place a DO card at the front of a sentence after substituting a question mark card for the period card. For example:

2 DO JOHN ATE THE APPLE . ? **1**

Next, you can explain to students that the *do* verb carries the tense for the question. This can be demonstrated by replacing the DO card with DID and the ATE card with EAT after substituting the ? for the . Thus:

2 DO JOHN ATE THE APPLE . **1** **3** DID **4** EAT ?
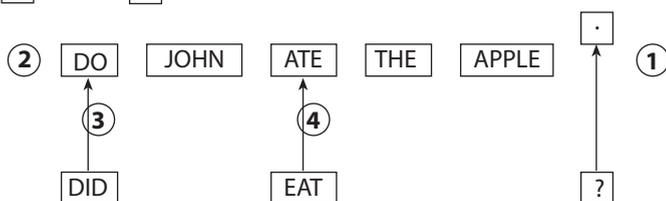
Cards could also be used to show that the *do* carries the tense and person markings with the simple present tense:

1 JOHN EAT S APPLES .

2 Substitute ? for the period at the end of the sentence and introduce DO to the front.

3 Show that the S of *eats* gets moved to the initial DO by moving the S from its position after EATS to a position following DO. Immediately replace DO S with a new card DOES explaining that rewriting *do* plus third person singular present as *does* is a convention in English.

After several examples have been done, you might have volunteers come up and practice forming questions by moving and substituting the cards. To give students additional practice, prepare (or have students prepare) pieces of paper with the words, question marks, and morphemes for pairs of students to manipulate at their desks. These can be exchanged with other pairs for more practice.

3. **Form**. Guessing games can give students good practice in both asking and responding to meaningful questions.

    a. For example, the game "Twenty Questions" provides an engaging way to practice forming and answering *yes/no* questions. The rules are simple. Someone thinks of an animal (including human beings), a vegetable (any living nonanimal), or a mineral (anything inanimate). The other players then can use up to 20 *yes/no* questions in an attempt to guess what the person is thinking of. If they can't guess after using all 20 questions, the person wins.

    A more concrete version for younger learners would be to have someone put an object in a paper bag, out of sight of the other players. They then get 20 *yes/no* questions to guess what is in the bag. For example:

Teacher:	I have put something in this bag. Try to guess what it is, using questions that can be answered only with a *yes* or *no*.
Student 1:	Is it round?
Teacher:	Yes, it is.
Student 2:	Is it hard?
Teacher:	No, it isn't.
Student 3:	Is it a ball?
Teacher:	No, it isn't.
Student 4:	Can we eat it?
Teacher:	No, you can't.

    The person who guesses correctly can be the person to hide the next object. If students are in the early stages of learning to form *yes/no* questions, you may want to restrict the questions to those with modals and the *be* verb. Also, if they are beginners, they might need some help from you in accurately forming the questions they want to ask.

    b. Another guessing game that encourages the use of *yes/no* questions is "What's My Line?", in which members of the class select occupations for themselves and the rest of the class must try to guess the occupation.

    c. A similar game is one in which students play "Who Am I?", where a class member pretends to be a well-known contemporary or historical figure. The other members of the class ask *yes/no* questions to guess the identity of the figure.

4. **Form.** Each student is given an assignment on a card. The assignment is to find someone in the class who is characterized by the particular trait written on the card. For example, one card might say, *Find someone who can play the drums*. Another might say, *Find someone who is a good cook*. Students must ask each other *yes/no* questions to find at least one person in the class for whom the trait is true.

5. **Form.** Getting students to ask each other questions about their backgrounds, academic majors, hobbies, favorite foods, and so on can be useful for practicing questions and helping students to get to know one another better. One of the techniques of the method "Suggestopedia" that encourages fluency is to have a student pose a question and then toss a large inflatable ball to another student. That student catches the ball, answers the question (if possible with a contraction), poses another question, and tosses the ball to a third student.

> **Student 1:** Are you from Mexico? (tossing the ball to S2)
>
> **Student 2:** (catching the ball) No, I'm not. I am from Guatemala.
>
> **Student 2:** Do you study engineering? (tossing the ball to S3)
>
> **Student 3:** (catching the ball) Yes, I do.
>
> **Student 3:** Do you enjoy videogames? (tossing the ball to S4)
>
> **Student 4:** (catching the ball) No, I don't.

For students with a low level of proficiency in English, this same activity can be done in a chain-drill form, in which the same question is asked of and answered by every student in the room, one by one, thereby creating a chain; for example:

> **Student 1:** Are you from Mexico?
>
> **Student 2:** No. I'm not. I am from Guatemala.
>
> **Student 2:** Are you from Vietnam?
>
> **Student 3:** No, I'm not. I am from Laos.
>
> **Student 3:** Are you from Morocco?
>
> **Student 4:** Yes, I am.

Working on questions with third person subjects would also be valuable. You might teach some formulaic responses at the same time. For example:

> **Teacher:** Is he from Mexico?
>
> **Student 1:** I don't know./I think so./I don't think so.

6. **Form.** Sometimes reciting verse or poetry can be a pleasant way to practice the intonation and grammatical form of *yes/no* questions. Of course, the verse would have to be something that could be made comprehensible to students. Several of Christina Rossetti's poems make repeated use of *yes/no* questions. They lend themselves to reading aloud in pairs or groups—one can ask the question, the other can answer it.

7. **Meaning.** To give students the necessary practice in asking and answering negative *yes/no* questions as native speakers of English do (responding to the presupposition, not the form), you can tell students a short story twice. During the second telling, change a few of the details. The students' task is to listen to the story intently and, after you have told each version once, to use focused negative *yes/no* questions to ask about details in the second telling that did not coincide with the first. For instance:

> *(First story)*
>
> **Teacher:** A man walked out the front door and tripped over his son's wagon. He scolded his son and told him to put the wagon in the garage. The boy did this. A while later, the man went into the garage and tripped over his son's wagon again.
>
> *(Second story)*
>
> **Teacher:** A man walked out the back door and tipped over his son's bicycle. He scolded his son and told him to put the bicycle in the shed. The boy did this. A week later, the man went into the shed and tipped over his son's bicycle again.

Student 1: Wasn't it the *front* door?

Teacher: Yes, it was.

Student 2: Wasn't it a *wagon*?

Teacher: Yes, it was.

Student 3: Didn't the father *trip* over the wagon?

Teacher: Yes. he did.

Student 4: Wasn't it a *day* later?

Teacher: No, it wasn't.

Students will need to make up and tell their own versions of two stories to receive practice in answering the focused negative *yes/no* questions of their classmates.

8. **Use.** To give students practice in using *yes/no* questions in making polite requests, have students write down five requests they would like to make. They should each then make the request of another student in the class. The second student should agree to comply with the request only if it is in a polite form. For example:

Student 1: Hey, Pablo, can I have some scrap paper?

Student 2: Sorry. No.

Student 1: Pablo, could I borrow some scrap paper, please?

Student 2: Sure. Here's some.

Exercises

Test your understanding of what has been presented.

1. *Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following concepts:*

    a. unmarked *yes/no* question

    b. negative *yes/no* question

    c. *some* in a *yes/no* question

    d. uncontracted negative *yes/no* question

    e. *yes/no* question with *do*

    f. statement-form question

    g. focused *yes/no* question

    h. standard short-form answer

    i. formulaic short answer

    j. *yes/no* question with phrasal modal and *do*

    k. echo question (showing surprise)

    l. elliptical *yes/no* question

2. *Draw the trees and arrows for the following questions:*

    a. Was she in class on Friday?

    b. Did he write the letter?

    c. Will her brother come to the party?

    d. Have you been living in Tampa?

3. *What rules have been violated as the following questions were formed?*

    a. *Do she went?

    b. *Could have he gone?

    c. *Runs he fast?

    d. *Do they be happy?

4. *What do negation and* yes/no *question formation have in common?*

Test your ability to apply what you know.

5. *An ESL/EFL student has said one of the following. You can understand the meaning they intend. What guidance could you give concerning the form?*

   a. *Saw you the movie?

   b. *Did you threw the ball?

   c. *Is not she intelligent?

   d. *A:* Do you like ice cream? *B:* *Yes, I like.

6. *We have chosen to place the chapter on negation before this chapter on yes/no question formation. Some ESL/EFL student materials do not do this. What are some arguments for teaching them in the order that we do here? Also, brainstorm ways to get students to ask questions. It is not as easy to do because it is usually teachers who do the asking.*

7. *You have a student who never inverts yes/no questions but simply uses an uninverted question with question intonation. When you tell him that he should invert, he replies that he often hears native speakers use uninverted questions. What would you say to this student?*

8. *An old joke arises from the fact that yes/no questions can serve more than one function. A wants to know the time and sees that B is wearing a wristwatch.*

   > **A:** Do you have a watch?
   > **B:** Yes. (and keeps on walking)

   Explain the misunderstanding.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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Endnotes

1. However, there are many other ways to answer a *yes/no* question. See, for example, Heritage and Raymond (2012).

2. It can be done, though, in British English with the main verb *have,* as in *Have you the time?* and in some lexicalized sentence stems in American English, such as *Have you any idea . . . ?*

3. It should be acknowledged that there is no *unique* question intonation, although some tones may be more common in questions than others (Cruttenden, 1986, p. 59).

4. Of the 637 questions in Weber's data, 108 were uninverted forms and 153 were nonclausal forms.

5. We single out *some* and *any* as determiners in this section in order to correct a misapprehension about *some* being used only in statements and *any* only in questions. The same point that we are making here applies also to related forms; e.g., in pronouns (*Has anybody/somebody seen the keys*?) and in adverbs (*Are you going anywhere/somewhere*?). Indeed, Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett, and Wilkes (2007) report that patients are more likely to report their health concerns when medical practitioners ask them, "Is there something else you would like to address in the visit today?" than if *something* is replaced by *anything*.