

# TAG QUESTIONS AND THEIR ANSWERS IN SANGIR

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A tagged negative sentence such as *He hasn't left yet, has he?* can be confirmed in one of two ways. To a native English speaker, the natural confirmation would be to say *No*. However, the equivalent question in Sangir (or Indonesian or Indonesian English) elicits the confirmation 'Yes' in Sangir. Actually the phenomenon is quite widespread. In this paper I suggest that the difference between the western negative response and the eastern positive response can be accounted for in terms of the analytical plane on which the speaker operates: if western, the plane of real-world meaning or "reality"; if eastern, then the plane of expression or "statement about that reality." The western response asks, "What happened?" and the eastern, "How was it reported?" But why does the eastern speaker operate on this plane of form or expression rather than underlying reality? It is suggested in this paper that speaking from form allows the speaker to express himself more politely and to avoid the 'no' often associated with opposition and contention. Thus, while the westerner speaks to realities with an essential disregard for propriety, the Indonesian speaks more to the sensibilities of the questioner with considerations of propriety and politeness.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the first problems in cross-cultural communication faced by the new arrival in Indonesia is understanding what is meant by the simple word *yes* as used in certain contexts. These contexts may be encountered in Indonesian English, Indonesian, Sangir<sup>1</sup> or some other language of Sulawesi or the surrounding area. But the one thing they have in common is a tag question added to a statement in order to elicit the addressee's confirmation or agreement with that statement.

For example, a typical tag question in English would be the verbal auxiliary and pronoun at the end of the utterance

- 1) He has left already, hasn't he?

which utterance expects a positive response such as *Yes* or the colloquial *Uh-huh*. The corresponding utterance in Sangir is:

- 2) I        sie    seŋ        nɪ/bua/,    ɪŋ?  
      SUBJ   he    already   left        TAG-Q  
      'He has left already, hasn't he?'

which is marked by the tag question *ɪŋ*,<sup>2</sup> and expects the positive response, *Ore* or the honorific *Ia* 'Yes'.

So far the data is quite straightforward. Now, however, whereas the English sentence

- 3) He hasn't left yet, has he?

expects the negative response *No*, the Sangir counterpart of this sentence,

- 4) I        sie    bɪdaŋ    taβe    nɪ/bua/,    ɪŋ?  
      SUBJ   he    yet        not    left        TAG-Q  
      'He hasn't left yet, has he?'

expects the positive *Ore* 'Yes' or equivalent. That is, a tag question following a negative statement in English calls forth a negative response, but in Sangir, a positive response.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. PROBLEM

The potential here for cross-cultural miscommunication is not trivial. If in the present examples the departure of the traveler is at all important, the western questioner may conclude that he has missed a crucial opportunity when he asks 'He hasn't left yet, has he?' and is told 'Yes' by his Sangir respondent. Unless the questioner knows the system, he will interpret the answer according to his own usage, viz., 'Yes, he has left already', and abandon all efforts to catch the traveler before his departure, which in fact has not yet taken place.

If, on the other hand, it is a Sangir who asks the question and is answered with a western-oriented 'No', he may become hopelessly confused because his own sentence patterns include no provision for such an answer.

The alternatives here can be displayed and perhaps better understood by means of the following charts, which herewith introduce replies to tagged statements that the respondent believes are wrong.

Tag Question	Reply	
	Statement Correct	Statement Incorrect
Statement Positive	Yes.	No.
<i>He has left already, hasn't he?</i>		
Statement Negative	No.	Yes.
<i>He hasn't left yet, has he?</i>		

Chart 1. The English Tag Questions and Their Answers

Tag Question	Reply	
	Statement Correct	Statement Incorrect
Statement Positive	Ore. 'Yes.'	Tala. 'No.'
<i>I sie sey ni/bua/, iŋ?</i> 'He has left already, hasn't he?'		
Statement Negative	Ore. 'Yes.'	Ore. 'Yes.'
<i>I sie bidaŋ taŋe ni/bua/, iŋ?</i> 'He hasn't left yet, has he?'		

Chart 2. The Sangir Tag Questions and Their Answers

Notice the discrepancy between English and Sangir paradigms, specifically in the replies to tagged negative statements.

The problem, then, is two-fold. In response to questions like *He hasn't left yet, has he?* (1) why does the westerner consider the appropriate response to be a negative one, and (2) why does the Sangir or other Indonesian consider the appropriate response to be positive?

### 3. PROPOSED SOLUTION

Quite simply, the westerner on the one hand and the Indonesian on the other are reacting to language systems on two different planes of analysis. Respectively, the planes are those of *meaning* as opposed to *form* (de Saussure 1959, Pike 1954), or *content* as opposed to *expression* (Hjelmslev 1953, Lamb 1966) or, more recently, *semantic* as opposed to *syntactic* components of the grammar (Chomsky 1965, or Lakoff and Ross 1967). Let us consider these individually.

When the westerner uses a tag question to elicit confirmation or agreement with a statement he has made, the orientation from which he operates and from which he expects his respondent to operate is that of meaning in general and of referential meaning in particular. Referential meaning has to do with the relations between an entity, action, state, etc. in the outside world and the linguistic units by which a speaker refers to these “referents”. In short, the westerner is concerned that his utterance reflect the realities he is talking about. Another way of saying the same thing is that he is concerned about truth values. In fact, the whole English tag-question paradigm can be mapped with a one-to-one correlation onto the so-called “truth table” logicians and computer programmers use to indicate the overall truth value of statements they are either negating or combining. The portion of the truth table that concerns us here is the following.

	Truth value of statement	
x (statement)	T	F
~x (denial of statement)	F	T

Chart 3. Truth Table (Partial)

Notice that the truth table values in Chart 3 exactly match the English tag-question responses displayed in Chart 1, *True* with *Yes* and *False* with *No*, without exception. The reason for this 100% correlation, I take it, is simply that for English the response always derives from the truth value of the statement.

While semantic notions like reference and truth value adequately account for western response patterns, we must turn to more textual considerations for the patterns of Sangir in particular and Indonesian languages in general. The Indonesian, instead of focusing on the signification or meaning of the statement, focuses on the signifiers, the means of expression, the lexical organization of the statement. The western response addresses the issue “What happened?” but the eastern, “How was it reported?”<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, for English, the response to our featured example

- 3) He hasn't left yet, has he?

is commonly paraphrased

- 5) No, he hasn't (left yet).

But for Sangir the response to the corresponding utterance

- 4) I sie bɪdaŋ taʒe nɪ/bua/, ɪŋ? ‘He hasn't left yet, has he?’

must be paraphrased with something like

- 6) ‘Yes, that (statement) is correct.’<sup>5</sup>

Whereas in the English response the negative matches the negation in the *meaning* of the statement, the Sangir response affirms the *form* of the statement.

And by analogy, this analysis is valid also for the Sangir response to 'He has left already, hasn't he?' which is 'Yes, that (statement) is true.' This "form" or "expression" analysis of Sangir tag questions is based on solid contrast with English and it seems unreasonable not to apply it consistently.

Question: How is the analysis affected when the Sangir inquirer expects a certain response and his respondent believes that response would be incorrect? We can hardly insist that if the questioner asks 'He hasn't left yet, has he?' the respondent will say 'Yes, that's right' when he knows the traveler has gone. Clearly, what he is saying is 'Yes, as a matter of fact he *has* left', and to this extent the Sangir respondent, like the westerner, is talking about the realities of the situation rather than the way those realities are expressed.

More problematic is what the respondent is saying when he denies the utterance 'He has left already, hasn't he?' Is he saying, 'No, the traveler hasn't left yet' or 'No, that's not a correct statement'? I cannot be certain, but I am opting for the first alternative on analogy with the preceding and on grounds now to be considered.

#### 4. EXPLANATORY HYPOTHESIS

Now, to analyze eastern and western tag question responses into distinct planes or components of the grammar is an interesting thing to do. But once we have done it we can hardly refrain from asking, "Why?" Why does the easterner focus on the form of the questioner's statement while the westerner is occupied with the meaning behind the form? Such questions may not be proper in traditional linguistics, but they certainly *become* of interest as the field moves on to include pragmatics and sociolinguistics. And that is precisely where the present question leads us: to the *use* of language as determined by the social situation of its speakers.

What is there, then, in the social and cultural traditions of the Indonesian that causes him literally to use his language differently from the westerner? The answer I suggest here is simply the *politeness* with which the Indonesian -- or his ancestor -- relates to others in his community. I will be using this term in a broad sense to include respect, honor, deference, avoidance, formality, attribution of status, etc.

Much has been written about the general impact of culture on language, or conversely, of language on culture (Whorf 1956, Carroll 1964). One of the most pervasive examples of this impact is that of naming and classification. The existence of several words for 'rice' in Sangir or 'snow' in Eskimo (Boas 1911) obviously indicates something of those cultures' interests in the subjects. And kinship terms have long been studied for the social attitudes with which they interrelate; e.g., in the Trobriand Is. a child calls his mother's sister 'mother', a term that reflects the same tenderness and intimacy he feels for his biological mother, but he calls his mother's brother 'uncle', a term that better allows for the social distance and antagonism between them (see Levi-Strauss 1958; see also Frake 1961 on disease names that are distinguished taxonomically in proportion to the society's need to refer to them).

Another area in which language and culture are seen as interdependent is that of special speech registers or language varieties whose use is governed by social factors. One such case concerns Koasati (USA), in which clearcut differences have developed between the common speech of men and women (Haas 1944), and Sangir shows traces of the same. Another Amerindian language, Comanche, has a "baby" language with special words that must be used by children until about the age of four years and then replaced by the adult terms (Casagrande 1948). Schoolchildren in Thailand find amusement in word games that in effect create subvarieties of standard Thai (Haas 1957). Sangir and English with its "pig latin" have comparable examples of this speech play. Verbal art as expressed in poetry, parable and dramatic narrative constitutes further illustration of special speech registers (Emeneau 1958, Wrigglesworth 1984). And occupational jargons illustrate the same point; there is great peer pressure on the new US Navy recruit to replace terms like 'floor' with *deck*, 'wall' with *bulkhead*, 'go downstairs' with *go below*, 'stop' or 'cancel (an order)' with *belay*, etc. For instances of oratorical, ritual and territorial registers in Austronesian languages, see Grimes and Maryott (1994).

While the literature on language and culture in general is abundant, there is much less to be found specifically on language in relation to the cultural value of politeness. What studies are to be found seem to center on eastern societies (Martin 1958) and especially on Indonesia (see additional references in Grimes & Maryott 1994). Geertz depicts the classical situation in Indonesia as follows.

The entire etiquette system is perhaps best summed up and symbolized in the way the Javanese use their language. In Javanese it is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationship between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and familiarity. Status is determined by many things... but the important point is that the choice of linguistic forms as well as speech style is in every case partly determined by the relative status (or familiarity) of the conversers (1960:248).<sup>6</sup>

It is against such a background that certain aspects of politeness must be seen in language systems such as, for example, the honorifics.

For information on honorific pronouns and terms of address and of reference, the researcher is largely limited to grammars and language courses for that language. Following Macdonald (1976), for example, the pronouns of Indonesian (and of Sangir) fall into two distinct sets, informal and formal, with traces of an even more formal third set. The formal set actually consists of a mix of pronouns and, especially for the second person, noun phrases similar to those that might occur as vocatives in respectful direct address; e.g. *ibu* 'mother, teacher, etc.', *saudara* 'brother, sister', *pak* 'father, the esteemed (one)'. Dardjowidjojo states that such terms are used "instead of *kamu* ['you (sg/pl)'] or *engkau* ['you (sg)'] to avoid a possible insult" (1978:57f).

Turning to the terms of address and reference themselves, it is clear that these too will be selected on the basis of the status attributed to the one addressed/referred to. But according to Geertz,

The number of variables specifically determining the selection of a particular level [of terms] are very numerous. They include not only the qualitative characteristics of the speakers -- age, sex, kinship relation, occupation, wealth, education... but also more general factors: for instance, the social setting (one would be likely to use a higher level to the same individual at a wedding than in the street); the content of the conversation (in general, one uses lower levels when speaking of commercial matters, higher ones if speaking of religious or aesthetic matters); the history of social interaction between the speakers (one will tend to speak rather high, if one speaks at all, with someone with whom one has quarreled); the presence of a third person (one tends to speak higher to the same individual if others are listening)...A complete listing of the determinants of level selection would, therefore, involve a thorough analysis of the whole framework of Javanese culture (1960:258).

Thus, for terms of address and reference, as for others, there may be scope for choice and perhaps uncertainties regarding those choices (see Brown & Ford 1961 on American English). But the choices themselves will always be determined according to culturally-defined categories. Whether the same Sangir individual is addressed as *Papa/ i Midrast/* or *i Skel/* may depend on whether his son Midras is viewed as still in residence at his father Skel's house or as already "out on his own."

Other nouns as well may be subject to honorific-based distinctions. Grimes and Maryott (1994) mentions a few for Sangir (commoners have 'children' but kings 'heirs' or 'successors'). One may also speculate that considerations of respect and status explain lexical contrasts such as those between 'younger' and 'older sibling' in many areal languages (e.g. Indonesian *adik* and *kakak*, respectively).

Verbs, too, may differ along common/honorific lines of the 'die/pass away' type. The Buru language commonly uses *tewa* for 'to learn' while *salik* conveys the same meaning in Buru's Garan register, the use of which is mandatory when a local resident passes through the Garan rain forest (Charles Grimes, personal communication, July 1989). This register may for present purposes be considered a high-status speech type used between travelers in the hearing of the respected and

feared ancestral spirits thought to live in this forest (see above comments by Geertz that one tends to use a higher speech level when others are listening *and* before hearers with whom the speaker has had past difficulties).

Affixation can also be affected by differences of honor or courtesy (on the phenomenon in Javanese, see Suharno 1982:147f). Functors generally do not manifest the distinction (Grimes & Maryott 1994), but the responses ‘yes’, ‘no’, etc. by virtue of their susceptibility to the distinction appear to be special types of morphemes (see Note 5). The honorific Sangir ‘yes’ has already been mentioned, and negatives will presently be discussed.

Other types of linguistic features have connections with the concept of politeness but are not properly honorifics themselves. The use of the passive to “soften” an imperative is one such feature. As I once stated regarding the Sangil dialect of Sangir, the politeness and deferentiality that underlie certain euphemisms and that so pervade the culture as a whole undoubtedly account for the Sangil preference for the passive voice in enjoining action, rather than the “stiffer,” more preemptory active voice: ‘This be done (by you)’ rather than ‘You do it!’ e.g., to politely refuse food being passed to him, one says, ‘(The food) be set down there.’ (Maryott 1985; see also Wolff 1973 on passive imperatives, though without reference to their social function). Closely related to passiveness is stativity, in which a condition is predicated of an object with even less reference to the agency that brought it about (Thomas Payne, personal communication, 1984). Thus, ‘Your chisel has been broken’, rather than the more confrontational ‘I broke your chisel.’

The relationship between politeness and euphemism has been referred to, and circumlocution has been characterized in Grimes and Maryott (1994) as a skill highly valued by the Sangir for the courtesy and cultivation on which it is based. And considerations of euphemism and circumlocution bring us right back to the matter at hand: Why should the cultural value of *politeness* prompt the Indonesian to answer questions according to their form and not the meaning underlying that form? Because, I suggest, answering to the form of the question enables him to answer agreeably and to avoid the ‘no’ often associated with opposition and contention - even if that answer derives from an earlier stage of his language and what we have today is largely an artifact of that more conscious process.<sup>7</sup>

The most enlightening development of this theme that I have seen is in a little book by Draine and Hall (1986) written to orient foreigners to Indonesia and endorsed by Joop Ave, Director General of Tourism in Indonesia. On the various expressions that *imply* but do not *say* ‘No,’ the authors state (1986:39ff, with my adjustments, especially to the ordering):

Indonesians go to elegant lengths to avoid speaking the word ‘No.’ Observe:

1. *Belum* ‘Not yet...’  
‘Are you married?’ ‘*Belum.*’ (Not yet, even though you are 85!)
2. *Tidak usah* ‘Not necessary...’  
‘Did you water the plants?’ ‘*Tidak usah.*’ (No, it just rained.)
3. *Tidak boleh* ‘Not allowed to...’  
‘Let’s play outside!’ ‘*Tidak boleh.*’ ([We] have not been given permission.)
4. *Tidak mau* ‘Don’t want to...’  
‘Do you want to eat?’ ‘*Tidak mau.*’ (No, thank you.)
5. *Bukan* ‘Not, something/someone else or other’  
‘Who did this? [= Did you do this?]’ ‘*Bukan saya!*’ (Not me!)
6. *Lebih baik tidak* ‘It is better that... not’  
‘I strongly advise you not to go out alone.’
7. *Terima kasih* ‘Thank you’  
‘Would you like tea?’ ‘*Terima kasih* (with a vague smile and a light shake of the head)’ (No, thank you.)

The authors might also have added *Tidak bisa* 'It is not possible' for 'No, you can't', and *Tidak ada* 'There are none' or *Sudah habis* 'They're gone already' for 'No, we don't have any'.

And Mochtar Lubis provides this cogent summary of the matter: "We [Indonesians] have begun to learn to say 'No' in so many ways that the actual word 'no' has become quite unfamiliar to us" (1985:12).

## 5. CONCLUSION

When I was young, there was a song that was quite popular and considered funny in my native United States. That song would not be at all funny or even interesting to an Indonesian audience, and the reason is highly relevant to our discussion.

The song was about a person who sold fruit and vegetables, work often done by those who had just recently come to stay in our country. Because these people were new arrivals and knew little English when they came, their English for a while was naturally not as good as that of a native speaker. This song singles out one of the common inaccuracies of these recent arrivals for some good-natured joking. The chorus of the song goes:

"Yes, we have no bananas; we have no bananas today."

Now, I doubt that this would be funny to Indonesians, but it is to us just by virtue of the conflict in our language between replying "Yes" to someone asking, "You don't have bananas, do you?" and at the same time saying "No", we don't have any! I suspect that the song would be funnier to Indonesians, or at least stranger and less polite, if it was sung:

"No, we have no bananas; we have no bananas today."

And if I am correct in this assumption, we have additional support for our hypothesis here that, while the westerner speaks to the realities in question with an essential disregard for propriety, the Indonesian speaks to the sensibilities of the questioner with considerations of propriety and politeness always uppermost.

## NOTES

1. The author has researched the Sangir language intermittently since 1960 in the southern Philippines, under the auspices of SIL in affiliation with the University of the Philippines, and on Halmahera and Great Sangir Islands, Indonesia, under a cooperative program of Pattimura University, Ambon, Maluku, Indonesia and SIL. The Sangir data is from those studies.

This paper was read at a Seminar for Research on the Societies and Cultures of Maluku, 9 November 1990, the Center for Moluccan Studies and Development, Pattimura University, Ambon. For invaluable suggestions on its present form I am indebted to James Sneddon, and Kenneth and Marilyn Gregerson.

2. *ɨŋ*, the true marker of the tag question, should not be confused with *ŋae* or *arau*.

*ŋae* ‘perhaps’ occurs in sentences with question intonation but expects no answer. It denotes hesitancy or tentativeness of utterance, as if the speaker knows his facts but does not choose to express them too strongly; e.g., ‘Perhaps you don’t understand?’ In Uma of Sulawesi Tengah, *tu* may perform a similar function, though according to Martens the speaker is less sure of his facts and is only speculating (Michael Martens, personal communication, 1999). Like Sangir *ŋae*, Uma *tu* does not call for an answer.

Sangir *arau* ‘or’ is used in interrogative disjunctive sentences that are incomplete in that they lack an explicit second alternative. Such sentences translate something like ‘Are you going or...(what)?’ Uma may have a corresponding marker in *ba*, but if so, that marker occurs sentence-initially and not finally as would normally be expected. A more likely equivalent is Galela (Halmahera) *eko*, which has been analyzed as a tag question marker by Shelden, but can hardly be answered with the diagnostic ‘Yes-No’ response, and elsewhere in Galela is glossed as ‘or’ (Howard Shelden, personal communication, 1990).

3. Notice that we are excluding from the discussion such affirmation tags as *He has left already, hasn’t he!* (with falling intonation) on the grounds that a reply is wholly optional and therefore what prompts it can hardly be classed as a question. See also the exception that has been cited for English, *He left, did he?* (Quirk et al 1985), which also appears to expect no response. In any case, these kinds of constructions do not occur in Sangir and so fall outside the scope of this discussion.
4. Albert Nikijuluw, head of the language laboratory at Pattimura University, tells me he holds a virtually identical view. He states that the westerner focuses on the “reality” of the situation and the Indonesian, on the “statement” about that reality (personal communication, Nov 1990).
5. Sentences like *He has left already, hasn’t he?* can, of course, be answered in the affirmative even without the *yes*. The respondent can simply reply *He has*. Or he can repeat the original statement back to the questioner: *He has left already*. These “repetition answers” seem particularly popular with the Sangir and help distinguish such otherwise ambiguous responses as ‘Yes (that’s right, he hasn’t left)’ from ‘Yes (as a matter of fact, he *has* left)’. Another distinguishing factor is higher pitched intonation on the latter of these responses.

Because tag questions may be answered either with a whole sentence or with a *yes* or *no*, the *yes/no* responses appear to be substituting for these sentences and could therefore be referred to as “pro-sentences”.

6. Concerning the way the system works, Geertz (1960:255) further comments,

“Etiquette patterns, including language, tend to be regarded by the Javanese as a kind of emotional capital which may be invested in putting others at ease. Politeness is something one directs toward others; one surrounds the other with a wall of behavioral (*lair*) formality which protects the stability of his inner life (*batin*). Etiquette is a wall built around one’s inner feelings, but it is, paradoxically, always a wall someone else builds, at least in part. He may choose



to build such a wall for one of two reasons. He and the other person are at least approximate status equals and not intimate friends; and so he responds to the other's politeness to him with an equal politeness. Or the other is clearly his superior, in which case he will, in deference to the other's greater spiritual refinement, build him a wall without any demand or expectation that [the other] reciprocate."

7. It may be asked why, in the light of their politeness patterns, the Sangir do not avoid a reply of 'no' to an incorrect positive statement ('He has left already, hasn't he?' 'No, he hasn't.'). just as they do to a correct negative statement ('He hasn't left yet, has he?' 'Yes, he hasn't.'). Beside the obvious answer that there is really no other alternative open to the respondent, one might argue that his saying 'no' would actually be more "polite" than saying 'yes' in that he would be telling the truth and perhaps saving the questioner from some form of inconvenience.

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