

How Do Children Say “Yes” in European Portuguese?

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1. Introduction

This paper provides some preliminary findings of a project concerning the acquisition of answer patterns to yes-no questions in European Portuguese (EP). It is argued that the acquisition of these answer patterns provides evidence for language modularity: the relevant modules are syntax, discourse and pragmatics. More specifically, it will be shown that the syntactic availability of different answer patterns in EP is not coincident with the emergence of certain discourse and pragmatic abilities involved in the adult usage of these answers. The data on the acquisition of answers to yes-no questions in EP are also shown to be evidence for (i) the early availability of the notion of Topic, (ii) the early availability of VP ellipsis and (iii) early difficulty in dealing with prosodic and discourse cues that allow a yes-no question to be interpreted as a confirmation request.

1.1 Types of answers to yes-no questions in European Portuguese

In EP there are four main types of answer to yes-no questions: *Sim* (yes) answers, verbal answers (which recover a form of the verb in the question), *Ser* (Be) answers (which use a frozen form of the verb *Ser* / Be) and adverbial answers. The latter type of answer is restricted to cases where certain adverbs (e.g. *já* / *already*, *só* / *only*, *também* / *also*) occur in the question.

- (1) Q: Ele já encontrou a chave?
he already found[3rd sg] the key
“Has he already found the key?”
- A: a. Sim. – *Sim* (yes) answer
Yes
- b. Encontrou. – verbal answer
found[3rd sg]
- c. É. / Foi. – *Ser* (Be) answer
is / was
- d. Já. – adverbial answer
already

This paper focuses on verbal, *Ser* (Be) and *Sim* (yes) answers. First, I will present arguments that set apart the different types of answer patterns and then turn to the discussion of data from the acquisition of these different answer patterns.

2. Arguments for the different status of the different types of answer

In this section, the three answer patterns considered here are syntactically and pragmatically distinguished.

2.1 *Sim* (yes) answers and *Ser* (Be) answers are not syntactically equivalent to verbal answers

The following facts support the claim that *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) answers are not syntactically equivalent to verbal answers:

a. A focalization operator in preverbal position precludes verbal answers, whereas *Sim* (yes) or *Ser* (Be) answers remain available.

- (2) Q: Só o João estudou Geografia?
only the João studied[3rd sg] Geography
“Did only João study Geography?”
A: Sim. / Foi. / É. / Só. / *Estudou.
yes / was / is / only / studied[3rd sg]

The material focused in this question (the ‘aim’ of the question) is interpreted as coincident with the material in the scope of *só* (only). If *só* (only) and its scope are outside the c-command domain of the verb, the verbal answer turns out to be impossible. Note that the presence of *só* (only) does not necessarily block a verbal answer. This type of answer remains available if the focus of the question is included in the c-command domain of the verb, even if it does not coincide with it:

- (3) Q: Ele encontrou só a chave?
he found only the key
“Has he only found the key?”
A: Sim. / É. / Encontrou. / Só.
yes is found only

Yes-no questions involving clefts provide evidence that c-command of the focused material in the question is indeed related to the choice of answer (cf. 4). If we assume that the question in (4) has the structure presented in (5), following the analysis of clefts in Costa and Duarte (2001), it becomes clear that a verbal answer is restricted to those cases where the verb recovered in the answer c-commands the focused DP (in this case, [DP a chave]) in the corresponding question.

- (4) Q: O que o João encontrou foi a chave?
what the João found was the key
“Was it the key that João found?”
A: Sim. / É. / *Encontrou. / Foi.
yes is found was

- (5) [IP [CP O que o João encontrou]_i foi [SC t_i [DP a chave]]]

b. A verbal answer may be unavailable in certain discourse environments, namely sentence-focus contexts

Given the discourse context in (6), the question must receive a sentence-focus interpretation. In this case, most EP speakers prefer *Sim* (yes) or *Ser* (Be) answers. Verbal answers are thus excluded when the focused material (the sentence) is not in the c-command domain of the verb.

- (6) A: O que é que aconteceu? A Teresa desmaiou?
what is that happened the Teresa fainted
“What happened? Has Teresa fainted?”
B: Foi. / Sim. / #Desmaiou.
was yes fainted

Confirmation contexts are also contexts where sentence-focus readings may obtain. The confirmation question uttered by Speaker A in (7) may receive two different interpretations:

- interpretation 1: Speaker A thinks it is strange that the little duck has a friend and asks the question to confirm that the little duck has a friend (is it true about x, x being the little duck, that x has a friend?). In this case, a verbal answer is available.
- interpretation 2: Speaker A is not sure about what has been said by speaker B and asks the question to confirm what was said (is it true about x, x being what you said, that x = the little duck has a friend?). In this case, the focus of the question is the all proposition, i.e., it is a case of sentence-focus reading. In this case, the verbal answer is not available.

- (7) Speaker B: O patinho tem um amigo.
the little duck has a friend
“The little duck has a friend.”
Speaker A: O patinho tem um amigo?
the little duck has a friend
“Does the little duck have a friend?”
Speaker B: Sim. / É / Tem.
yes is has

These facts indicate that the choice of answer to a yes-no question in EP depends on what material is focused in the question. In other words, it depends on the information structure of the question, since the material focused in a yes-no question must be recovered by the answer.

Particularly, a verbal answer is available whenever the material focused in the question is under the scope of V or coincides with V and its scope. If one makes a classic assumption that scope relations are defined under c-command and that the material recovered in an answer is the material in the scope of the only lexically realized item in the answer, the difference between verbal answers on the one hand and *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) answers on the other should correspond to a syntactic difference, a scope difference: *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) must occupy a position structurally higher than the position occupied by the verb in a verbal answer in order

to recover higher material. Therefore, I will assume that verbal answers are instances of VP ellipsis (following Martins 1994). Moreover, I will assume that the verb in VP ellipsis (and in verbal answers) is in T (against Martins 1994 and in agreement with Matos 1992, and Cyrino and Matos 2002 and with the general idea of short verb movement in Portuguese argued for in Costa 1996). A verbal answer is then possible when the focused material in the question coincides with TP or is under the scope of T. Assuming (8) is the basic syntactic structure for EP sentences,

(8) $[_{\Sigma P} \Sigma [_{\text{AgrSP}} \text{AgrS} [_{\text{TP}} \text{T} [_{\text{VP}} \text{V} [\dots]]]]]]$

Sim and *Ser* may occupy a high left peripheral position, for instance Σ - this explains why *Sim* and *Ser* answers qualify as answers to questions in which the preverbal subject (which raises to Spec, AgrS) is focused.

These data also link verbal answers to the default interpretation of yes-no questions. In order to define what the default interpretation of a yes-no question is, I will assume with Reinhart (1982) that the two procedures of assessing and storing information are relativized to topics. Reinhart elaborates on Strawson (1971: 93) definition of topics: “[...] assessments of statements as true or untrue are commonly, though not only, topic-centred in the same way as the statements assessed; and when, as commonly, this is so, we may say that the statement is assessed *as* putative information *about its topic*.” By default, a yes-no question is interpreted as a request to assess all the presented information about a given topic. This explains why SVO yes-no questions typically receive a default interpretation, where the preverbal subject is interpreted as a topic (cf. Duarte 1987). This happens unless something else forces the interpretation of the subject as Focus (cf. cases where the subject is under the scope of *só / only*) or part of the Focus (sentence-focus readings).

2.2 *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) are not exactly equivalent answers: there are pragmatic and discourse distinctions that affect the distribution of both types of answer

Although *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) answers seem to have the same syntactic status, they do not have the same pragmatic or discourse value. Namely, *Ser* (Be) answers are not available as agreement answers to indirect requests / invitations.

(9) Q: Podes fechar a janela?
could[2nd sg] close the window
“Could you close the window?”

A: Sim. / #É. / Posso.
yes / is / can[1st sg]

(10) Q: Vamos tomar café?
go[1st pl] take coffee
“Shall we have coffee?”

A: Sim. / #É. / Vamos.
yes / is / go[1st pl]

Moreover, *Ser* (Be) answers are felt by EP speakers to be especially adequate answers to questions in confirmation contexts. Some speakers only accept *Ser* (Be) answers in confirmation contexts.

3. How do children say yes in European Portuguese?

The fact that EP presents several different answer patterns to yes-no questions raises interesting questions, namely:

- a. Do the syntactic differences between the different types of minimal answer have consequences for the acquisition process?
- b. Are the pragmatic and discourse differences between *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) answers reflected in the acquisition process?

I will consider the spontaneous production of two monolingual children acquiring European Portuguese. The data were transcribed using the CHAT format (MacWhinney and Snow 1985)¹. Each file corresponds to the complete transcription of one session of videotaping (45-50 minutes of recording).

Child	Age range	Number of files
Inês	1;6.6-3;11.12	21
Tomás	1;6.18-2;3.9	10

Table 1

3.1 Stages in the acquisition of minimal answers

The results presented for Inês in Table 2 show that this child does not produce *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) answers in the earliest sessions. If we consider Inês' data, we are able to identify three stages: at Stage I only verbal answers are available; at Stage II low percentages of other answers emerge and the number of *Ser* (Be) answers increases; at Stage III, the number of *Sim* (yes) answers increases and the number of *Ser* (Be) answers decreases.

	Stage I 1;6.6 – 1;8.2	Stage II 1;9.19 – 2;1.10	Stage III 2;2.1 – 3;11.12
Verbal answer	100% (12/12)	85,5% (71/83)	59,4% (138/232)
<i>Sim</i> (yes) answer	0	3,6% (3/83)	34% (79/232)
<i>Ser</i> (Be) answer	0	8,4% (7/83)	2,5% (6/232)
Adverbial answer	0	2,4% (2/83)	3,8% (9/232)

Table 2 - Acquisition of minimal answers in Inês' data

¹ Inês was videotaped by Maria João Freitas for her PhD research (cf. Freitas 1997) and for the project PCSH/C/LIN/524/93 developed at Laboratório de Psicolinguística da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa. The first sessions of Inês were partially transcribed by Maria João Freitas and completed by myself, whereas later sessions were transcribed by Teresa Costa and myself. Tomás was videotaped and transcribed by myself.

With respect to the second child, the data from all the sessions considered here seem to correspond to Stage II in Inês' data: all the answer patterns are available, although *Ser* (Be) answers outnumber *Sim* (yes) answers.

	(Stage II) 1;6.18 – 2;3.8
Verbal answer	74% (205/277)
<i>sim</i> (yes) answer	2,1% (6/277)
<i>Ser</i> (Be) answer	21,6% (60/277)
Adverbial answer	2,1% (6/277)

Table 3 - Acquisition of minimal answers in Tomás' data

3.2 What does early availability of verbal answers mean?

In this section I would like to emphasize the fact that, as far as these data are representative, verbal answers are available from the earliest stages on. This fact has interesting consequences if we adopt the analysis of verbal answers referred to in section 2.1.

If verbal answers indeed correlate with the default interpretation of a yes-no question, which is a topic-centered interpretation (cf. section 2.1), the ability to produce a verbal answer may mean that children (i) are aware of the default interpretation of yes-no questions, which is a topic-centred interpretation and (ii) are able to correctly identify the topic in a question, namely by interpreting preverbal subjects as topics (De Cat 2002 shows that children acquiring French are able to deal with topics from very early stages on). Example (11) illustrates an early verbal answer in a context of a question with a phonologically realized preverbal subject:

- (11) *MAE: eu posso?
 I may
 "May I?"
 *INI: pô [: podes].
 may [Inês 1;8.2]

On the other hand, if verbal answers are indeed instances of VP ellipsis, the production of verbal answers may mean that children are able to deal with VP ellipsis from the earliest stages (at least from 1;6) on. Verbal answers may indeed be the only type of evidence that children deal with VP ellipsis at these early stages, since at 1;6 the limitations to the type of structures produced make it difficult to find other VP ellipsis contexts (for instance sentence coordination). Notice that there is evidence that children do treat verbal answers as VP ellipsis and not, for instance, as null objects. Example (12) is a clear-cut of a verbal answer with an elided VP:

- (12) *MAE: o cavalo vai papar?
 the horse is going to eat
 "Is the horse going to eat?"
 *TOM: vai.
 is going [Tomás, 1;9.14]

The early availability of VP ellipsis is particularly interesting, since ellipsis structures are resolved at the syntax / discourse interface (cf. revision in Winkler and Schwabe 2003); to assume early ability to deal with VP ellipsis in relevant contexts also implies the assumption that at least a certain type of discourse abilities is available from the earliest stages on.

Finally, a note on the later emergence of *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) answers in Inês data. Notice first that the absence of *Sim* answers may not be due to the absence of adequate contexts, since *Sim* (yes) answers are possible as answers to all types of yes-no questions. If data from other children confirm this pattern, it may be the case that the later emergence of *Sim* (yes) and *Ser* (Be) answers is evidence for the late emergence of a high functional projection associated with these polarity elements (or evidence for late emergence of relevant features in this high functional node).

3.3 More on the acquisition of syntactic and discourse knowledge

Data from first answers to yes-no questions may also raise other interesting questions concerning early discourse abilities. In section 2.2 it was pointed out that *Ser* (Be) answers are felt by EP speakers as especially adequate in confirmation contexts. These contexts include answers to yes-no questions that are confirmation requests. In order to recognise a yes-no question that is a confirmation request, we have to rely on the evaluation of the discourse context (cf. example 14 below) or on the identification of the particular intonation pattern of this type of questions (Mata 1990 shows that these questions bear a specific intonation pattern). In case children use *Ser* (Be) answers more often in confirmation contexts than as answers to “normal” yes-no questions, this would be evidence that they clearly recognise the discourse value of a yes-no question that is a confirmation request and that they can rely either on discourse or on prosodic cues.

For the performance of children in these contexts, I have looked at answers to ‘normal’ yes-no questions and at two types of confirmation contexts: confirmations of preceding declarative sentences (cf. 13) and answers to yes-no questions that are in fact requests for confirmation (cf. 14).

(13) Speaker A: O João vai ao cinema.
the João goes to+the cinema
“João goes to the cinema.”

Speaker B: Sim. / É. / Vai.
yes / is / goes

(14) Speaker B: O João vai ao cinema.
the João goes to+the cinema
“João goes to the cinema.”

Speaker A: O João vai ao cinema?
the João goes to+the cinema
“Does João go to the cinema?”

Speaker B: Sim. É. Vai.
yes / is / goes

The following tables provide the percentages of *Ser* (Be) answers in Inês and in Tomás' data. These are coincident in two respects: in Inês' data and in the period between 1;6.18 and 1;11.12 in Tomás' data, (i) the percentage of *Ser* (Be) answers is higher in confirmations of declarative sentences than in confirmations requested through yes-no questions; (ii) *Ser* (Be) answers to yes-no questions that have a confirmative value occur more often than *Ser* (Be) answers to "true" yes-no questions, but they do not reach the percentages for confirmations of preceding declarative sentences.

	1;9.19 – 3;11.12
Conf. Prec. Decl.	12,12% (4 / 33)
Ans. yes-no conf.	4,16% (2/48)
Ans. normal yes-no	3,24% (5/154)

Table 4 - *Ser* (Be) answers in confirmation and other contexts in Inês' data²

Abbreviations:

Conf. Prec. Decl. – confirmations of preceding declarative sentences

Ans. yes-no conf. – answers to yes-no questions that are confirmation requests

Ans. normal yes-no – answers to yes-no questions that are not confirmation requests

	1;6.18-1;11.12	2;0.10-2;3.9
Conf. Prec. Decl.	100% (5/5)	72,72% (8/11)
Ans. yes-no conf.	47,05% (8/17)	65,51% (19/29)
Ans. normal yes-no	29,85% (20/67)	29,72% (11/37)

Table 5 - *Ser* (Be) answers in confirmation and other contexts in Tomás' data

Abbreviations: see Table 4.

Although the data presented here are not sufficient to warrant a safe conclusion, this type of results could mean that, although the child understands the specialization of *Ser* (Be) answers as answers to confirmations (*Ser* answers occur more often as confirmations of declarative sentences than in other contexts), he / she is not yet completely able to deal with complex discourse contexts that alter the interpretation of yes-no questions (*Ser* answers show lower percentages in answers to yes-no questions that have the value of a confirmation request than in cases of confirmations of preceding declarative sentences). It could be the case that the child is (in most cases) answering to a yes-no question with the value of a confirmation as if it were a normal yes-no question.

There is indeed some additional evidence supporting the claim that children do not clearly recognize as such questions that are confirmation requests. When

² Verbal answers involving the forms *é* (is) or *foi* (was) of the verb *ser* (to be) were not taken into account as verbal answers – these are the forms of the verb *ser* (to be) used in *Ser* (Be) answers - and it could be misleading to consider them here as verbal answers. Notice that the number of *Ser* (Be) answers to yes-no questions in the preceding tables included both answers to yes-no questions that behave as requests for confirmation and answers to "normal" yes-no questions. This table also does not include answers to tags.

answering to a confirmation request, one may use *pois* (in fact), as in (16) and (17). Thus the presence of *pois* in an answer would be clear evidence that the child recognizes the context as a confirmation context.

(16)A: O patinho já tem um amigo.
 the little duck already has a friend
 “The little duck already has a friend.”
 B: *Pois sim. / Pois é. / Pois tem. / Pois já. / Pois.
 in fact yes in fact is in fact has in fact already in fact

(17)B: O patinho já tem um amigo.
 the little duck already has a friend
 “The little duck already has a friend.”
 A: O patinho já tem um amigo?
 the little duck already has a friend
 “Does the little duck already have a friend?”
 B: *Pois sim. / Pois é. / Pois tem. / Pois já. / Pois.
 in fact yes in fact is in fact has in fact already in fact

Table 6 shows that the children never use the word *pois* when answering to yes-no questions that are confirmation requests. They also do not commit mistakes using this confirmation word in answers to ‘normal’ yes-no questions. Interestingly, at least one of the children uses *pois* in answers to tags. Tags are in fact questions that require confirmation, but in the case of tags the confirmation request is marked syntactically.

	Inês	Tomás
Conf. Prec. Decl.	12 (first: 1;10.29)	6 (first: 2;2.9)
Ans. yes-no conf.	0	0
Ans. normal yes-no	0	0
Ans. tags	3 (first: 1;8.2)	0

Table 6

Abbreviations:

- Conf. Prec. Decl. – confirmations of preceding declarative sentences
- Ans. yes-no conf. – answers to yes-no questions that are confirmation requests
- Ans. normal yes-no – answers to yes-no questions that are not confirmation requests
- Ans. tags – answers to tag questions

So there is no evidence at this point that children are able to deal with the relevant cues that allow to identify a yes-no question as a confirmation request. As far as the evaluation of the discourse context is concerned, Avrutin (1999: 50) claims that “knowledge of the rules of conversation is different [from syntactic knowledge] in that its implementation relies on speakers’ capacity to make inferences about other speakers representations of the conversation”. The same author argues that children often fail to establish this type of inferences. The facts presented in this section may be in agreement with this claim, even though the claim has been applied to very different processes: to understand a yes-no question as a confirmation

request (without using intonation as a resource), the child has to infer that if the other speaker asks something that was already answered in previous discourse, he is not asking for new information but asking for a confirmation. Children seem to fail at establishing this type of inference.

Now let us turn to the question concerning the interaction between prosody and syntax. Recall that ‘true’ yes-no questions present a distinct intonation pattern from yes-no questions with the value of confirmation requests (cf. Mata 1990) – prosody would in this case be an alternative to recover the specific discourse value of the yes-no question. Children have been argued to show very early awareness of certain prosodic contrasts (cf. Mazuka 1996, Guasti et al. 2001, Höhle et al. 2001, Christophe 2002) but they have also been argued to have late access to certain other prosodic contrasts (cf. Gualmini et al. 2002; Vogel and Raimy 2002). As far as these data can tell, children do not seem to be aware of this intonation contrast at this point.

3.4 A short note on pragmatic development

As showed in section 2.2, *Ser* (Be) answers are inadequate as agreement answers to indirect requests / invitations. Tomás presents cases of inappropriate use of *Ser* (Be) answers, i.e., use of *Ser* (Be) answers as agreement answers to yes-no questions that are pragmatically requests or invitations (cf. 18). There are 9 occurrences of this type of inadequate answer in Tomás’ data.

(18) *MAE: olha # filho # olha aqui
look son look here
“Son, look, look over here.”

*MAE: vamos ver este # agora ?
are (we) going to see this now
“Shall we see this one now?”

*TOM: é .
is

[Tomás 1;7.14]

4. Conclusions

The data discussed in this paper allow for the following preliminary findings:

- (i) Verbal answers are available from the earliest stages, although *Sim* (yes), *Ser* (Be) and adverbial answers may not be available from the start;
- (ii) The early availability of verbal answers may be evidence for early ability to deal with the default interpretation of yes-no questions, which is a topic-centred interpretation;
- (iii) If verbal answers are instances of VP ellipsis, early verbal answers are evidence for production of VP ellipsis in the earliest stages;
- (iv) In the early stages, children have difficulty recognising a yes-no question as a confirmation request. In particular, there is no evidence that children are aware of discourse and prosodic cues that allow the identification of a yes-no question as a request for confirmation;
- (v) Even when they are able to produce *Ser* (Be) answers, children do not seem to be aware of the pragmatic constraints on this type of answer.

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