

Short Responses to Negative Questions and Statements



Giving short, **yes** or **no**, responses to negative questions and statements, seems to be a problem for many Brazilians. Because of this, a Brazilian who doesn't speak German, could end up in a situation like the following.

Example, wrong answer:

(A): Don't you speak German?

(B): Yes.

(A): Ah, das ist gut. Mein Deutsch ist viel besser dan mein English.

In English with **yes** or **no** you communicate if the fact is true or not. It **does not** indicate if you agree with the other speaker or not. In this example, speaker (A) understands that with **Yes**, speaker (B) wants to say that, being able to speak German, is true, it's a fact. It means: "Yes, I do speak German." That is why speaker (A) continues the conversation in German.

If (B) does not speak German, the answer should be: **No**.

Example; good answer:

(A): Don't you speak German?

(B): No.

(A): That's no problem. We can discuss this in English.

When you answer with **yes** or **no**, it does not make a difference if you respond to a negative or positive question or statement.

Look at this dialogue.

(A): Don't you speak German?

(B): No.

It communicates exactly the same as the following dialogue.

(A): Do you speak German?

(B): No.

Better is to always repeat the auxiliary verb of the question or use the verb **to do**, for the following reasons.

One reason is that answering only **yes** or **no** is considered less polite.

Good, polite example:

(A): Don't you speak German?

(B): No, I don't.

(A): That's no problem. We can discuss this in English.

Enfos

Another reason is that, by repeating the auxiliary verb, the here described problem can be avoided in the following ways.

- Most people realize that the answer **Yes, I do** means: *Yes I do speak German* and that **No, I don't** means: *No, I don't speak German*.
- Many also understand that there is something wrong with **Yes, I don't**, and **No, I do**, that you can not say that, that it is illogical. This will help them to avoid making the error.
- Those who say: **Yes, I don't** or **No, I do**, without noticing the problem will be helped avoiding communication problems because the listener detects the problem and will rephrase the question to clear the doubt.

Example, confusing answer, (B) makes mistake but (A) can hear it:

(A): Don't you speak German?

(B): Yes' I don't.

(A): Do you mean that you do speak German or that you don't speak German?

or

(A): Excuse me, do you speak German or don't you?

or

(A): Excuse me, do you speak German or not?

(B): I don't speak German.

(A): No problem. We can discuss this in English.

It is of course possible that you do speak German. If you do speak German, the following would be good communication in English.

Good, polite example:

(A): Don't you speak German?

(B): Yes, I do.

(A): Ah, das ist gut. Mein Deutsch ist viel besser dan mein English.

Note: Often, speaker (B) will answer a bit different to stress that his positive answer disagrees with what speaker (A) said. Speaker (B) can say, for example:

- Oh, yes, I do.

- Oh, but I do.

If you wish, you can give answers showing that you agree with the speaker.

Example, person (A) speaking to three people:

- (A): Don't you speak German?
- (B): That's correct.
- (C): Exactly.
- (D): That's right.
- (A): That's no problem. We can discuss this in English.

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Although answers to positive questions don't seem to cause much problems, The following example, just to be complete:

Example:

- (A) Do you speak Portuguese?
- (B) Yes, I do.
- (A) In which language shall we continue, English or Portuguese?

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