

“Ikke sant?” as a response token in Norwegian conversation

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1. Introduction

The discourse marker “ikke sant?” (lit. “not true?”) in Norwegian may be compared to the German expression “nicht war?” and the French “n’est-ce pas?”. In English, the closest equivalent is probably a tag question such as “isn’t it?” or “right?”. In its traditional usage, “ikke sant” is appended to a declarative sentence in tag position and used to appeal to the interlocutor for confirmation of common knowledge, understanding or agreement: “Du skal på festen, ikke sant?” (“you’re going to the party, right?/aren’t you?”). However, in the last five to ten years, a new usage has developed in colloquial Norwegian, namely as an independent response token, occurring either alone or in combination with a positive or negative response word (“Ja ikke sant?” or “Nei ikke sant?”). Here is an example:

(1) Arne has been telling Ulla about a friend who has a very large tattoo.

- 1 Arne: syns det er litt for mye å ha (.) så mye da.
- 2 (I) think it’s a bit too much to have (.) that much
- 3 Ulla: ja (.) trenger ikke å dekke (.) hele kroppen din liksom,=
- 4 yeah (.) (you) don’t need to cover (.) your whole body sort of
- 5 Arne: =**ikke sant**.
- 6 (.)
- 7 Arne: nei jeg tenkte å ha den og så (.) kanskje jeg skal ta en gang til.
- 8 (no) I thought I’d have this and then (.) maybe I’ll do it once more.

Arne's response "ikke sant" (line 5) agrees with Ulla's expression of opinion in line 3. It is produced with falling intonation and does not itself elicit a response. Arne continues the conversation by going back to a previous topic, namely his own tattoo.

It is somewhat surprising that a tag used to appeal for agreement is turned into a freestanding response used to *express* agreement. In this article, I analyze the sequential characteristics and pragmatic functions of this new response token. The analysis is based on a collection of instances excerpted from the NoTa corpus of conversational Norwegian at the University of Oslo. This corpus consists of 1 million words of transcribed conversations and interviews with 166 persons from the Oslo area. The informants constitute a representative selection according to age, gender, domicile and education. The excerpts used here have been retranscribed by me according to the conventions of Conversation Analysis (cf. (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998).¹ Before I address the pragmatic functions in more detail, I will give an overview of the distribution and development of the response token.

2. Distribution

As mentioned, the response function of "ikke sant" is rather new. In order to see the temporal development I investigated 4 corpora of conversations from the last two decades. The first is a small corpus of informal conversations between unacquainted interlocutors, collected in 1994-1995 by myself (Svennevig 1999). The second is the UNO corpus of teenage conversation from 1997-98 (Drange & Hasund 2001). The third is a transcription of the first season of the television reality show "Big Brother" from 2001 (Big Brother-korpuset). And the fourth is the NoTa corpus, collected in 2004-2006 (Norsk talespråskorpus). From these corpora I excerpted 100 random instances of the phrase "ikke sant" and calculated the percentage of instances that were responses. The results are presented in table 1. As can be seen, the response function developed in the late nineties and increased significantly in the first five years of the new millennium, from 9% in 2001 to 31% in 2004-6.

Corpus	Year	Age span	Instances	% responses
Unacquainted	1994-95	20-35	90	0
UNO	1997-98	13-18	872	1
Big Brother	2001	22-36	175	9
NoTa	2004-6	15-88	1555	31

Table 1. Percentage of instances of "ikke sant" with a response function

The response usage of "ikke sant" is most common among young people, but it is also used by older people. As a rough measure of age distribution, I searched the NoTa corpus for the phrases "ja ikke sant" and "nei ikke sant".² The results are presented in table 2. As can be seen, teenagers are the most frequent users, with 77.4 instances, approximately twice as many instances as the rest of the age groups taken together. There is some variation between the other age groups, but the important point to note here is that adults up to the age of 60 and above use the expression occasionally.

Age	No. of speakers	"Ja ikke sant"	"Nei ikke sant"	"Ja+nei ikke sant"	Normalized distribution ³
15-19	53	138	26	164	77.4
20-29	22	25	8	33	37.5
30-39	27	47	12	59	54.6
40-49	12	2	0	2	4.1
50-59	23	24	0	24	26.1
60-88	29	4	0	4	3.4
Total	166	240	46	286	43.1

Table 2. Number of instances of the tokens "ja ikke sant" and "nei ikke sant" according to the age of the informants.

The individual variation is important. Half the group of speakers do not have a single occurrence, while a small number of speakers have a very large number of instances. By way of illustration, of the 240 instances of "ja ikke sant" 121 were produced by 10 individuals. These "hyper users" were mainly youths (8 were aged 17-19, and the other two were 34 and 35). Arne in (1) is one of them.

3. Pragmatic functions

As a response, “ikke sant” mainly occurs after assessments, statements of opinion, and other statements with an evaluative import. In these environments it expresses acceptance and emphatic agreement. This is the case whether or not it is produced with an initial response word (“ja” or “nei”).⁴ Both response words claim agreement, the positive (“ja”) with an affirmative proposition, the negative (“nei”) with a negative proposition. My argument here will be that in addition, the response claims a certain degree of epistemic authority, that is, independent prior knowledge or attitudes concerning the state of affairs talked about. So, in addition to accepting the claim made by the interlocutor and agreeing with it, the speaker signals independent grounds for his or her point of view. The first class of cases is where the epistemic authority derives from a claim made previously in the conversation. In the second class of cases, the speaker’s opinion has been hinted at previously in the conversation. In the third class the opinion is first expressed by the interlocutor and not the response producer. I will review these cases in turn.

This part of the analysis is based on in-depth study of a (random) selection of 60 instances of the response tokens in their conversational context.

3.1 Confirmation of own prior claim

In (1) above, we saw that “ikke sant” occurred after an evaluative statement, “you don’t need to cover your whole body”, which in turn confirmed the speaker’s own prior assessment “(I) think it’s a bit too much to have that much”. This three-turn structure is very common in the data. “Ikke sant” regularly occurs as a confirmation of a statement of opinion that makes a similar point as the speaker has previously made him- or herself. Let us consider another example:

(2) Gro and Eva are talking about a couple who have been going steady for two years.

- 1 Eva: de er jo så skj- søte da, men jeg trodde aldri at det kom til å vare.
- 2 *they are so sweet, but I never thought that it would last.*
- 3 to år vet du.

- 4 *two years you know.*
 5 Gro: det er lenge altså.
 6 *that's a long time.*
 7 Eva: ja sinnsykt bra.
 8 *yeah incredibly good.*
 9 Gro: det er lenge når du er eh [femten.]
 10 *that's a long time when you're fifteen.*
 11 Eva: [mh femten] seksten sytten,
 12 *mh fifteen sixteen seventeen,*
 13 Gro: det er lenge altså.=
 14 *that's a long time.*
 15 Eva: =kjempelenge. to år det er en evighet,
 16 *superlong. two years that's an eternity,*
 17 *vi var sammen i fem måneder jeg og eksen min,*
 18 *we were dating for five months me and my ex,*
 19 *og jeg syns det var kjempelenge.*
 20 *and I thought that was superlong.*
 21 Gro: **(h)ja (h)ikke sant?**

Gro's assessments in line 5, 9 and 13 are confirmed by Eva, who subsequently makes a comparison with her own prior relationship (line 17-19). "Ikke sant" comes in the third position of this three-turn structure and can be considered a display of epistemic authority in that Gro treats Eva's utterance as a confirmation of her own prior assessment. Clearly Gro does not have epistemic authority concerning the individual example given by Eva (her experiences with her ex-boyfriend). The authority concerns the general point that the example is used to support (namely that two years is long for a relationship between teenagers).

The sequential pattern for this class of cases can thus be represented as follows:

- A: Evaluative statement (assessment, statement of opinion etc.)
 B: Supporting, analogous claim (exemplification, elaboration, comparison etc.)
 A: "(ja/nei) ikke sant"

In (2), the initial claim is a general point about relationships (as evidenced by the present tense and the pronoun "you": "that's a long time

when *you're fifteen*”), which is then supported by a specific (contrasting) example. In (1), a specific claim is supported by a more general statement: an assessment about an individual tattoo is supported by the formulation of a more general “norm” (“you don’t need to cover your whole body”). In this way, the examples display an argumentative structure with the second utterance providing premises for inductive or deductive inference in support of the interlocutor’s claim. The third position response claims that this line of reasoning is in line with the speaker’s own reasoning.

3.2 Confirmation of unstated point

Another third position usage of “ikke sant” is when a point (evaluation, opinion) is projected or hinted at in the first utterance, then explicitly formulated by the interlocutor in the second, and the third position response claims that this was indeed what the speaker was moving towards or hinting at.

(3) Unn is retired and has said that she has many books waiting to be read.

- 1 Unn: godt å ha liksom noe som jeg [kan-]
- 2 *good to have sort of something that I can-*
- 3 Liv: [ja] noe å se frem til.
- 4 *yes something to look forward to.*
- 5 Unn: **ja ikke sant.**
- 6 Liv: ja
- 7 *yes*
- 8 Unn: nei må ha noe å lese eller så blir det for vanskelig.
- 9 *(no) have to have something to read or else it gets too difficult.*

Here, Unn starts an assessment but is cut off mid-course, when Liv comes in with a collaborative completion (line 3). This utterance anticipates the point of Unn’s assessment. Unn accepts this completion and claims by the use of “ikke sant” that this was precisely what she meant.

In the next example, the point is implicit in the response producer’s first utterance:

(4) Arne and Ulla are talking about tattoos.

- 1 Arne: men jeg kjenner en som,
 2 *but I know a guy who,*
 3 han har tatovering over hele ryggen,
 4 *he has a tattoo over the whole back,*
 5 som går liksom fremover her og sånn,
 6 *that goes sort of forward here and stuff,*
 7 han har betalt noe sånn femten til tjue tusen for tatovering liksom.
 8 *he has paid something like fifteen to twenty thousand for tattoos like.*
 9 Ulla: å herregud så mye penger.
 10 *oh my god how much money.*
 11 Arne: **ikke sant.**

Arne's first utterance is not explicitly evaluative, but merely states the price of the tattoo. Ulla makes an explicit assessment, and Arne confirms by his response that this implicature was indeed what he was intending to convey.

The distinction between anticipating an upcoming point and making explicit an already expressed – but implicit – point is not always clear-cut. In the following example, both interpretations could be possible:

(5) Jon and Anne are talking about their future choice of profession.

- 1 Anne: men du få- finner jo al- aldri den der perfekte lærerjobben heller da,
 2 *but you never ge- find the perfect teacher job either,*
 3 for liksom-
 4 *cause like-*
 6 Jon: du har alltid et annet fag. hhh
 7 *you've always got another subject.*
 8 Anne: nei men jeg tenkte alt sånn,
 9 *no but I meant all that,*
 10 a oss si hvis du er lærer på barneskolen da.
 11 *let's say if you're a teacher in primary school.*
 12 Jon: mhm
 13 Anne: åhh
 14 (SIGH)
 15 Jon: hhh

182 JAN SVENNEVIG

- 16 Anne: barn ikke sant,
 17 *children right,*
 18 Jon: masse skriker[unger hele] tida. hh
 19 *lots of screaming kids all the time.*
 20 Anne: **[i:kke sant.]**
 21 Anne: så tenkte jeg ungdomsskole, (.) tenåringer,
 22 *then I thought junior high, (.) teenagers,*
 23 Jon: som ikke gidder å høre på hva du [sier. hhh]
 24 *who don't bother to listen to what you say.*
 25 Anne: [eh::] **nei ikke sant? heheh**

The general point being made by Anne in line 1 is that it's impossible to find the perfect teacher job. Her first substantiation of this claim is made by just sighing audibly and saying "children right" (line 12-15). She thus indicates that there is a problem with children, but does not say what the problem is. This is what Jon makes (more) explicit in his response in line 17: "lots of screaming kids". In the next example presented by Anne she just says "teenagers" (line 20), again leaving it up to Jon to fill in what is the problem with them (which he actually does in line 22). In both these cases Anne makes a less than explicit claim and then leaves the floor open to response. However, it is not necessarily clear whether what Jon does is to anticipate Anne's possibly upcoming point or to spell out the implications of what is already said. Anne can be seen as inviting a collaborative formulation of the point she wants to make, but in case Jon would not come in with a collaborative completion, she would have had the opportunity to make the point herself.

These examples thus display the following sequential structure:

- A: Implicit or projected evaluative statement
 B: Explicit formulation or anticipation of point
 A: "(ja/nei) ikke sant"

3.3 Confirmation of interlocutor's claim

In a considerably smaller number of cases, "ikke sant" occurs after a statement of opinion by the interlocutor, which does not confirm a previous statement or implicature by the response producer:

(6) Ellen has just said that in Morocco everyone goes out at night.

- 1 Ellen: jeg mener alle er ute og det er så fint
 2 *I mean everyone is out and it so nice*
 3 for her i Norge går ikke det,
 4 *cause here in Norway that's not possible,*
 5 du kan [ikke] gå ned i byen klokka tolv og [ha det] moro,
 6 *you can't go down town at twelve and have fun,*
 7 Lise: [nei] [nei]
 8 *no no*
 9 **ikke sant,**
 10 Ellen: ikke sant sånn du ser jo liksom ingen og
 11 *right like you don't see anyone and*
 12 de du ser er ikke akkurat (h)de (h)du
 13 *the ones you see aren't exactly those you*
 14 Lise: nei
 15 *no*
 16 Ellen: de personene du kan henge sammen med.
 17 *the people you can hang out with.*
 18 Lise: **ikke sant,**
 19 Ellen: men der er alle- familier er ute klokka tolv om natta,
 20 *but there everyone- families are out at twelve at night,*
 21 [det er så rart å se.]
 22 *it's so strange to see.*
 23 Lise: [åh det ser så] koselig ut.
 24 *oh it looks so cosy.*

In this example, it is Ellen and not Lise who expresses her opinion about going out in Norway. However, Lise agrees with that opinion (“no” in line 7). In this way, she can be considered to have expressed an opinion after all (although only in response to Ellen’s statement). Furthermore, we can observe the same type of argumentative structure as was noted above: First, there is a statement of opinion in line 1-3, namely that going out at night in Norway is not possible (in the same way as in Morocco). Then there is a substantiation of the claim in line 5 (“you can’t go down town at twelve and have fun”). This claim is further substantiated by a specification of the reason why this is not possible (line 10-12: “you don’t see anyone, and the ones you see aren’t exactly those you [...] can

hang out with”). “Ikke sant” occurs after these substantiations. Thus, Lise’s use of “ikke sant” as response in this example has clear parallels with the use in the two former classes of usages (presented in 3.1 and 3.2) in that it occurs after a claim supporting the main argument. The claim to epistemic authority may be considered as grounded in the previous expression of agreement, and presenting this point of view as already held prior to the interlocutor’s statement.

In some cases the speaker does not express agreement either, but the interlocutor presents the substantiating claim as obvious to the response producer. Let us look at an example:

(7) Arne has said that he had to travel a long way to get his tattoo.

- 1 Arne: du kan sikkert få de til å lage det andre steder men da trur jeg
 2 *you can probably get them to make it other places but then I think*
 3 det koster mer, for da må de liksom tegne det opp og
 4 *it costs more, cause then they have to sort of draw it up and*
 5 Ulla: nei jeg tror ikke det koster [noe mer]
 6 *no I don't think it costs any more*
 7 Arne: [°nei°]
 8 *no*
 9 (.)
 10 Ulla: det er jo jobben dems [da og dem] får jo penger for det liksom
 11 *after all it is their job and they do get money for it like*
 12 Arne: [ja ikke sant.]

Ulla’s statement of opinion clearly contrasts with Arne’s previous statement, so in this case there is not a possibility that Arne is referring back to a previously expressed opinion at all. His response “no” in line 7, produced in *sotto voce*, is merely a receipt of information and not an expression of agreement (cf. (Svennevig 2004). And after her turn, there is a micro-pause (line 9) where Arne could have taken the floor to express agreement, but he doesn’t. This case could seem to defy the analysis that the response producer claims epistemic authority by the use of “ikke sant”. However, the interlocutor’s substantiation is presented as obvious, self-evident. In the present case this is marked by the discourse particle “jo”, which is a common ground marker (Fretheim 1991), and tentatively translated in the current context as “after all”. In this way, it

can be claimed that Ulla presents the claim as already familiar and acceptable to Arne. Arne then claims that this is indeed the case by the response “ikke sant”. In this case, then, it is the interlocutor, and not the response producer, who presents an opinion as already endorsed by the response producer.

The next example is even less prototypical, since there is no explicit evaluative statement at all:

(8)

- 1 Tora: vi lånte m- vi måtte betale depositum på aggregatet,
 2 *we borrowed m- we had to pay a deposit for the generator,*
 3 så lånte vi ti tusen kroner av Torgeir,
 4 *so we borrowed ten thousand kroner from Torgeir,*
 5 Jens: ja
 6 *yes*
 7 Tora: men det er jo bare å ta når vi får [tilbake depositumet.]
 8 *but of course that we can just take when we get the deposit back.*
 9 Jens: **[ja ikke sant det er det-]**
 10 *that is the-*

The lack of an explicit evaluation makes this example an exception in the collection of instances. However, there might be an implicit evaluation here, embedded in the statement in line 7, namely that the loan is not a problem. This evaluative aspect is present in the adverb “bare” (just). The explanation for why the loan is not a problem is that they can pay Torgeir back with the deposit money. This reason is presented as rather obvious, and marked by the common ground marker “jo” (here translated as “of course”).

This example does not either contain a substantiation or elaboration of a claim. The response “ikke sant” follows directly after the expression of opinion by the interlocutor. The sequential pattern of this class of cases is thus a two-part structure rather than a three-part structure:

- A: Evaluative statement (assessment, statement of opinion etc.)
 (+ supporting, analogous claim)
 B: “(ja/nei) ikke sant”

In this class of cases, the epistemic authority is less grounded in the previous discourse. It is more like a *claim* that the response producer has held this opinion all along. As such, it may be used “strategically” to give an impression of being knowledgeable or authoritative in the matter at hand. Emphasizing ones own prior knowledge may in certain cases involve downplaying the newsworthiness of the interlocutor’s contribution. Several people have (in personal communication) reported annoyance with this new response form, claiming that it sounds “arrogant” and “self-confident”. The reason might be that it promotes the speaker’s own knowledge at the interlocutor’s expense. In this sense it may not always appear to be so supportive after all. And the claim to epistemic authority may be false.

4. Discussion

In all the examples analyzed, the response token “ikke sant” expresses acceptance and agreement with an evaluative statement in the interlocutor’s previous turn. It has the characteristics of a preferred response, namely being produced without pausing, hesitation or other forms of delay (Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987). On the contrary, it frequently occurs in overlap with the previous utterance, as in examples (5), (7) and (8), or latching on to it, as in (1). As a purely responsive utterance, “ikke sant” does not itself elicit further talk. This is the case whether it is produced with falling or rising intonation. It is used in extended turns by the interlocutor, as in (6), or in sequence closings, as in (1).

Most examples display a three-part structure, where the first is a (potentially disputable) claim, and the second gives evidence or support to it. “Ikke sant” occurs in the third position as a subscription to this line of reasoning. In this way there is an argumentative relationship between the first and second turn. The second turn does not merely repeat or confirm what the first speaker said (as for instance in “second assessments” (Pomerantz 1984)), but elaborates and substantiates it in various ways. It can for instance present an example that confirms a general claim (as in (2)), it can present a generalization or “rule” that supports a unique claim (as in (1)), or again it can spell out the gist or the upshot of a claim (as in (5), cf. Heritage & Watson 1979).

The pragmatic meaning of the response is to claim epistemic au-

thority in the matter at hand. This is most frequently evidenced by a previous explicit or implicit expression of opinion. In other cases, it is the interlocutor who expresses the opinion, but the response producer signals agreement. In these cases, the response token displays the “echoic” relationship between the interlocutor’s claim and the speaker’s own previous statement of opinion. In a smaller number of cases, the response producer does not express an opinion, but seems to indicate by the use of “ikke sant” that the interlocutor’s statement of opinion confirms a position s/he has held all along.

At the outset it was noted that it seems paradoxical that a tag appealing for confirmation is turned into a confirming response itself. However, if we consider the response words *ja* and *nei* as anaphoric expressions conveying the content of the previous evaluation (Fretheim 2006), then the expression “ikke sant” may be considered a tag after all. The bare response “Ikke sant” may be considered as further derived from this form. And there might be a semantic trace of the tag usage in the response token. Heritage and Raymond (2005) have studied second assessments that challenge the epistemic authority of the first assessment. They note that one way of doing this is by appending a tag question to the second assessment:

[...] the [assessment + tag] format invites agreement to the position that is taken by the second speaker, thus preempting “first position” in the sequence. In this way it upgrades the second speaker’s claimed rights over the first with respect to the matter at hand. (p.28)

The format second assessment + tag question has much in common with response word (understood as an anaphoric reference) + tag question. And although “ikke sant” does not actually invite agreement in this usage, the function of claiming epistemic authority may derive from the conventional usage as an appeal for confirmation.

Consequently, there are good reasons for seeing the response usage as developed from the function as a tag question, and there are clear semantic affinities. The various uses of “ikke sant” should thus rather be considered a case of polysemy and multifunctionality than a case of homonymy.

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Notes

1. Some symbols used here:
 - (.) Micropause
 - = Latching (turn transition without pause)
 - word Stress
 - [word] Simultaneous talk
 - wo:rd Lengthening
 - hh Outbreath, laughter
 - (h)word Laugh quality
 - °word° Soft quality
2. Bare "ikke sant" was left out of this calculation because the search program did not allow distinguishing the use as a response token from use as a sentence-final tag.
3. Here, the numbers in the previous column ("Ja+nei ikke sant") have been normalized to total per 30 informants.
4. For the present purposes, I will not distinguish between responses with and without response word. Without denying that there may be differences between these formats in certain respects, I intend to present an analysis that is valid for both formats.

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