

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

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The pragmatic idiom “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 simple tag question such as “isn’t it?”. 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, the last 5-10 years a new usage has appeared in Norwegian conversational language, 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 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 the following, I will analyse the sequential characteristics and pragmatic meanings 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 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 CA (cf. (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998). Before I address the pragmatic functions more in detail, I will give an overview of the distribution and development of the response token.

## Distribution

As mentioned, the response function 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 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 talespråkskorpus). 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	Ca. 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 is most common among young people, but it is also used by adults. As a rough measure of age distribution, I searched the NoTa corpus for the phrases “ja ikke sant” and “nei ikke sant”.<sup>1</sup> The results are presented in table 2. As can be seen, teenagers are the most frequent users, with 77,4 instances (normalized to total per 30 informants), approximately twice as many instances as the rest of the age groups taken together. There is some

<sup>1</sup> Naked “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.

variation between the other age groups, but the important point to make here is that adults up to the age of 60+ use the expression occasionally.

Age	No. of speakers	”Ja ikke sant”	”Nei ikke sant”	”Ja+nei ikke sant”	Normalized distribution
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
<i>Total</i>	<i>166</i>	<i>240</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>286</i>	<i>43,1</i>

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

The individual variation is important. Half of the 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.

### **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”).<sup>2</sup> Both response words claim agreement, the positive (“ja”) with an affirmative proposition, the negative (“nei”) with a negated proposition. My argument in the following 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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 a second class of cases, the speaker's opinion has been projected or hinted at previously in the conversation. In the third and fourth class the opinion is expressed by the interlocutor, but more or less explicitly subscribed to by 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.

### **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 synes 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 (l. 17-19). "Ikke sant" comes in the third position and can be considered a display of epistemic authority in that she 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 move 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.

### **Confirmation of unstated point**

Another third position usage 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 (1. 3). This utterance preempts 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 preempting 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 in place:

(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-*  
5 Jon du har alltid et annet fag. .hhh  
6 *you've always got another subject.*  
7 Anne nei men jeg tenkte alt sånn,  
8 *no but I meant all that,*  
9 la oss si hvis du er lærer på barneskolen da.  
10 *let's say if you're a teacher in primary school.*  
11 Jon mhm  
12 Anne åhh  
13 (SIGH)  
14 Jon hhh  
15 Anne barn ikke sant,  
16 *children right,*  
17 Jon masse skriker[unger hele] tida. hh  
18 *lots of screaming kids all the time.*  
19 Anne **[i:kke sant.]**  
20 Anne så tenkte jeg ungdomsskole, (.) tenåringer,  
21 *then I thought junior high, (.) teenagers,*  
22 Jon som ikke gidder å høre på hva du [sier. hhh]  
23 *who don't bother to listen to what you say.*  
24 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” (l. 12-15). She thus indicates that there is a problem with children, but not 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” (l. 20), again leaving it up to Jon to fill in what is a problem with them (which he also 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 preempt 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: Explicitation or preemption of point

A: "(ja/nei) ikke sant"

### 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 told about her vacation in Morocco, where 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 ikke akkurat (h)de (h)du  
13 *those you see aren't exactly the ones 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 (l. 8-10: “you don’t see anyone, and those you see aren’t exactly the ones you [...] can hang out with”). “Ikke sant” occurs after these substantiations. Thus, her use of “ikke sant” as response in the following has clear parallels with the use in the two former classes, and can also here be considered to be claiming independent knowledge of the pieces of information and the line of reasoning.

This class of cases thus displays the following sequential pattern:

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

### **Confirmation of obvious piece of evidence**

The last and smallest class of cases is not grounded in any expression of opinion by the speaker at all. This may at first sight seem to represent a possible counter-argument to the analysis that the response token claims epistemic authority. Let us look at an example:

- (7) Arne has said that he had to travel to a distant shop 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*





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 1979)).

A question that will need further investigation is whether claiming epistemic authority in this way may in certain cases involve downplaying the newsworthiness of the interlocutor’s contribution. Certain people have 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. If this is the case it may not always appear to be so supportive after all...

## References

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