

## Newsmarks from a crosslinguistic perspective: Introduction

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### 1 Introduction

Sharing knowledge is a fundamental concern for participants in social interaction. It is manifest in the myriad ways in which information is requested, provided, acknowledged, assessed, contested, or otherwise negotiated by conversationalists (Heritage 2012a,b; Tomasello 2008). While information is almost inevitably communicated in whatever humans do in the presence of attentive others (Goffman 1963), some devices and practices have evolved which are dedicated to epistemic work, that is, to seeking, imparting or receipting a piece of knowledge, and thus to positioning participants with respect to their access, authority, responsibility, and affect toward this knowledge (Stivers et al. 2011; Enfield 2011).

Newsmarks – expressions like *really, is it right, did he, you're kidding* – are a set of linguistic items explicitly used for receipting knowledge. Produced in response to an action of information sharing, they display the recipient's epistemic stance toward it. The term 'newsmarks' was introduced by studies from Conversation Analysis (CA) (Jefferson 1981; Heritage 1984), but interest in these expressions can also be found in pragmatics and other scholarly areas concerned with the context-sensitive production of 'listener responses' (Xudong 2009). However, in CA and elsewhere, the notion of newsmarks has been generally treated as familiar enough to obviate further definition. It is only in recent years that an interest in unpacking this notion and advancing an understanding of newsmarks as a category have emerged. The impetus for such an interest can be traced in part to research carried out on languages other than English, which suggests the existence of newsmarks as a general linguistic and pragmatic phenomenon.

The present Special Issue draws on, interrogates, and develops this cross-linguistic work. The contributions originated in two panels on 'Responses to news: crosslinguistic perspectives', organized by the editors and Xiaoting Li. One of the panels was held at the *International Conference for Conversation Analysis* (ICCA 26, 2023, Brisbane), the other at the Conference of the *International Pragmatics Association* (IPrA 18, 2023, Brussels). In this introduction, we give an overview of previous research on newsmarks and related items before situating the Special Issue within this work and giving brief synopses of each contribution.

## 2 Newsmarks in previous work

Newsmarks have attracted the attention of scholars in a wide range of disciplines. In pragmatics, sociolinguistics, communication studies, and experimental and social psychology, expressions such as *really?* or *you're kidding!* are mentioned in studies concerned with recipients' behavior and feedback in conversation. A 'lumping approach' (Xudong 2009) has been typically implemented in these fields whereby short and brief, verbal and non-verbal elements, are grouped together under a single category of 'listener responses' (Dittmann and Llewellyn 1967; Bavelas et al. 2002) or 'backchannels' (Yngve 1970; Liesenfeld and Dingemanse 2022). Common to this varied group of items is their assumed non-turn-claiming status and their role in signaling the continued attention to, understanding of, and agreement with the main speaker's talk. Some scholars, inspired by observations made by Schegloff (1982) and Goodwin (1986), have operated with a more granular classification and distinguished between plain *continuers* (e.g., *m-hm*, *yeah*) and *assessments*, such as *wow* and *really?* which disclose something of the stance taken by the recipient toward the main speaker's talk (Young and Lee 2004; Mereu, Cangemi, Grice 2024). However, these studies too are not concerned with the particularities of these minimal assessments, but instead treat them as a method to pass the opportunity for a full turn, thus encouraging more talk from the previous speaker.

A particular interest in newsmarks – indeed the very noticing and labeling of this category – can be traced back to two papers by Jefferson (1981) and Heritage (1984). In both of these works, the topic emerges as a long excursus into an issue tangential to the main focus of the respective paper, which, in Jefferson's case, is post-response pursuits, and in Heritage's, is the change-of-state token *oh*. The key observation proposed by Jefferson and Heritage concerns the role of newsmarks for sequence expansion: they argue that when expressions such as *really?* or *did he?* occur in responsive position, they do not close a sequence (in contrast, for example, to the 'news receipt' *oh*) but instead invite its continuation. Jefferson and Heritage ascribe this effect to the double role of these expressions as 'news markers' and 'doubt markers' (Jefferson 1981: 71) or 'assertions of ritualized disbelief' (Heritage 1984: 341). According to Heritage, newsmarks 'treat a prior turn's talk as news for the recipient' and thus invite them to 'at minimum, reconfirm the substance of the prior turn's talk' (p. 342). Stressing more strongly the ambiguity of these items, Jefferson argues that newsmarks are expansion implicative since they 'alternatively or combinedly' treat prior talk as news to be expanded and/or as a dubious proposal to be disputed (p. 71-72).

Notably, in these early studies, newsmarks are defined by reference to the retrospective orientation they index toward the prior speaker's turn, which may prompt an assessment, an elaboration, or a minimal response in the ensuing sequence. Both Jefferson (1981) and Heritage (1984) make the point that the variability of the sequences that follow newsmarks is contingent on the variability of the tokens that set them into motion, some projecting expansion and some curtailing of the sequence. However, the two scholars diverge in how they treat minimal responses to newsmarks. In Jefferson's view, a minimal response is a token of disalignment, since it displays reluctance to expand on the news or engage with the doubt proposed by the newsmark; Heritage, on the other hand, contends that a simple reconfirmation will suffice as a properly aligned response since, even if minimally, it does the work of verifying the validity of the prior speaker's assertion.

Later studies usually present more succinct accounts of newsmarks, aiming for definitions of newsmarks in terms of a single main action they make relevant next. Maynard (2003: 100), for instance, observes that within the News Delivery Sequence, newsmarks (e.g., *really? oh do they?*), as opposed to news receipts (e.g., *oh, oh really*), serve to encourage development and elaboration of the news announcement (cf. also Hayano 2013). Stivers and Enfield (2010), on the other hand, classify newsmarks as requests for confirmation in their typology of questions. Rather than proper confirmations, Gipper et al. (2023) argue that newsmarks invite re-confirmation, because they don't introduce a new proposition but operate back on previous talk (cf. also Aldrup 2023). Since they index doubt, Thompson et al. (2015: 77) conclude that newsmarks make relevant 'some work, if only minimal, on the part of the informer to substantiate or support the informing before it can be accepted'. In like manner, Raymond and Stivers (2016) mention newsmarks as one method for off-record account solicitations.

Admittedly, attempts to identify a single main action that newsmarks elicit from co-participants require selectivity and simplification of a widely diverse set of possibilities. More inclusive accounts, on the other hand, would rely on less constraining models, specifically with regard to the response space following the newsmark. Such accounts are offered in two more recent studies, which focus exclusively on newsmarks. Gubina and Betz (2021) notice that following German *echt* 'really', recipients can produce a reconfirmation, an elaboration, or an account. The type of response that *echt* prompts is contingent on the epistemic positioning of the participants: when no discrepancy of knowledge is displayed, a simple reconfirmation will suffice and even, in a clearly affiliative context, a lack of such will not be treated as an absence; on the other hand, when the *echt*-speaker claims greater knowledgeability on the matter in

question, an account is solicited which is designed to restore epistemic convergence and secure social alignment.

The observation that newsmarks in and of themselves exert a low degree of projectability is also proposed by Marmorstein and Szczepk Reed (2023). Their study, focusing on the Arabic token *waḥḥāhi* (lit. 'by God') and the English token *really*, shows that newsmarks can be followed not only by retrospectively oriented actions (confirmation, elaboration), but also by prospective actions, such as continuations of tellings or even initiations of new sequences. Moreover, newsmarks can be placed not only after the delivery of news, but also after an informing has been reconfirmed. Taken literally, then, the term 'newsmark' does not cover all the options that participants exploit through their use. Instead, the authors suggest that the consistent role of such expressions across various contexts is to index an orientation to prior talk as *remarkable*, that is, as worthy of some attention for its unexpected quality – whether it is simply non-trivial or utterly staggering. This generic proposal of an informing as remarkable (to whatever degree) is analysed by the next speaker in terms of its relevancy to the ongoing sequence, an analysis which can evidently engender different trajectories of next action.

This Special Issue presents seven new studies of newsmarks in English, Finnish, German (various dialects), Hebrew, Korean, and Yurakaré. Before moving to a summary of each contribution, we point out a few properties of this class of items which resurface in these studies, as in previous literature, and which appear to be fundamental to and characteristic of the category of newsmarks as a whole.

### **3 The category of newsmarks**

Newsmarks are primarily delimitable by reference to the sequential position they occupy: they occur in response to a prior action of information sharing, i.e., a news delivery, an announcing, a reporting or a telling (Thompson et al. 2015: 50). Less commonly, newsmarks can be found in response to assessments (Pomeranz 1984) or noticings (Auer et al. 2024; Goodwin 1996). While the latter do not foreground the sharing of information as the main concern of the speaker, they still convey knowledge – an idea, an opinion, a realization of a publicly perceived referent – to which the newsmark can relevantly respond.

Across languages, there seem to be two main sources for newsmarks' formats: (i) lexical expressions indicating the concept of *realness* (and related meanings); (ii) grammatical structures and forms referring to the property of an assertion's *polarity*. The two sources are not mutually exclusive and can be combined in a particular format.

**Realness formats** consist of, or include, adjectives and adverbs that lexically denote or connote meanings of realness, truth, seriousness or rightness. In their capacity as newsmarks, these forms are not modifiers of a more elaborate syntactic structure, but occur as freestanding utterances or as predicates in a copular construction, e.g.: English *really*, German *echt*, Hebrew *be'emet* (lit. 'in-truth'), Arabic *wallāhi* (lit. 'by God'), Mandarin *zhende (ma/a)* ('really', He et al. 2025), Korean *cincca (-ya)*, 'really', Japanese *honto(ni)* ('really', Hayano 2013).

**Polarity formats** can be syntactically more expanded or more minimal. A more expanded format is composed of a full clause: the predicate of this clause – typically a verb – can either present a lexical repetition of the predicate of the assertion addressed by the newsmark (e.g., Finnish [verb repeat + *vai*]), or be a copula or a pro-form referring back to this predicate (e.g., English *is it, did he*). A minimal format consists of a positive or negative polarity particle, e.g., English *yes* (Stivers 2007), Hebrew *ken* (Marmorstein and Matalon 2025), English *no* (Thompson et al. 2015: 78), German *nee*. Unlike realness formats, polarity formats do not explicitly target the factual or actual validity of the prior speaker's assertion, but they do so implicitly, by repeating or referring back to the assertion as a whole.

Through their prosodic design, and particularly their rising pitch, newsmarks often take the form of interrogatives. When clausal, newsmarks often also assume the syntactic structure of an interrogative (Thompson et al. 2015: 90ff.). Formally, then, newsmarks pose a question as to the reality or truth of the assertion they target and for this reason they have been commonly regarded as indicators of doubt or disbelief (see Section 2 above). However, through their ritualized use, these items have assumed a more diversified role which is not necessarily – and not even prevalently – the literal questioning or doubting of a prior speaker's assertion.

Indeed, the highly diverse opportunity space that they open up suggests that newsmarks are not just ambiguous but semantically underspecified. Rather than committing the speaker to a surprised or doubting stance, newsmarks propose some incompatibility between the incoming knowledge and the recipient's existing knowledge, which is further particularized by reference to the terms of the specific sequence in which they are embedded. Newsmarks then enable implicit negotiation of participants' orientation and alignment with regard to a piece of knowledge as more or less expected, noteworthy, surprising, or credible. The distribution of newsmarks across languages suggests that such off-record negotiations are an effective general practice that goes beyond particular cultural convention.

Beyond these general points, our brief outline opens up many avenues for future research, especially from an interactional-pragmatic perspective. First, the distributional and functional differences

between realness and polarity formats remain to be explored. This would be particularly interesting in a language system where both formats are commonly used, such as English. Another interesting question concerns the relation between items identified as newsmarks and expressions that convey related meanings such as appreciation or surprise (*wow, you don't say*) – is there a systematic division of labor between these classes of items? Finally, we can benefit from more research into the relational work accomplished by newsmarks. Existing research suggests that beyond their epistemic function newsmarks can be used for displays of affiliation and even empathy (cf. Marmorstein and Szczepek Reed 2023). Future research will be able to establish what types of items, and under what circumstances, can be mobilized for this work.

#### 4 Synopses of the Special Issue contributions

The seven contributions to this Special Issue reveal the opportunities of a cross-linguistic study of the pragmatic use of newsmarks. Several papers introduce a continuum along which newsmark-like responses can sit. This kind of gradient can involve an epistemically more convergent or more divergent stance (Aldrup 2025, Weber and König 2025), or it can be envisaged as a spectrum of discourse functions within which specific newsmarking forms are positioned (Gubina and Betz 2025). Other writers show how newsmark uses are particularized within specific actional and sequential contexts (Kik and Kim 2025, Koivisto 2025, Marmorstein and Shor 2025). While some contributions focus on specific (groups of) constructions (Gipper, Gubina and Betz, Kim and Kim, Koivisto, Marmorstein and Shor), others consider fuller sets of newsmarks in a given language (Aldrup, Weber and König).

**Kim and Kim** (2025) explore two responses to news in Korean, *cincca* and *cincca-ya*, the latter with an added copula. Both forms appear in the context of news and thus may seem interchangeable. However, the authors find that the two items differ with regard to the validity they ascribe to prior informings: *cincca* accepts prior news without question and without making confirmation relevant. It shows affiliation and provides an opportunity for the telling to be extended. In contrast, *cincca-ya* treats informings as questionable and requiring verification. Kim and Kim make a case for the grammatical distinction between the particle response *cincca* and the minimal clausal response *cincca+COP* as a resource for making this interactional distinction.

**Koivisto** (2025) investigates the Finnish construction [verb repeat + *vai*], that is, the lexical repetition of the prior turn's verbal predicate followed by the turn-final discourse particle *vai* ('or'). Previous work has shown this construction to be used as a newsmark. The paper presents a nuanced distinction between three related uses of the construction for participants' management of each other's knowledge and

stance. Firstly, Koivisto shows that [verb repeat + *vai*] can act as a newsmark that receipts a prior informing from a (partially) unknowing position and treats it as newsworthy, opening up a potential space for confirmation. Secondly, the construction can be used to receipt a correction of an incorrect knowledge claim, thus showing revised understanding. Here, what follows is not confirmation but an account for how the [verb repeat + *vai*] speaker knows the prior claim to be incorrect. Thirdly, the construction is used in response to turns whose main action is not an informing, and on which [verb repeat + *vai*] speakers claim to have equal knowledge. Here, the construction challenges and potentially disagrees with the proposition of an earlier utterance and makes an expansion of the sequence relevant. This use is closely connected to other-initiated repair. For all uses, Koivisto presents Finnish discourse particles that perform related and overlapping but distinct actions.

**Aldrup** (2025) approaches newsmarks as preliminary receipts of new information, that is, as interactional resources for managing, rather than simply acknowledging receipt. Under the term 'requests for re-confirmation' (RfRCs), she investigates the varying degrees to which German and English RfRCs can orient to prior informings as hard to believe or otherwise problematic. One basic finding of the study is that speakers use newsmarks to create a preliminary space where the prior epistemic asymmetry between teller and recipient is shown to persist. Another is a spectrum of more or less affiliative RfRCs, with 'newsmarking' RfRCs as affiliative and 'problem-indicating' RfRCs as disaffiliative, and with neutral RfRCs in between the two. Sequential positioning and multimodal turn design are shown to contribute to the interactional role of RfRCs, with multimodal features upgrading or downgrading the affiliative force of a given RfRC.

**Gipper** (2025) also considers 'requests for re-confirmation', which she conceptualizes as a subcategory of newsmarks. The contribution focuses on repeats as RfRCs in Yurakaré, a language isolate in Bolivia. Gipper explores the hypothesis that repeats, which are redundant informationally and reproduce prior information explicitly, can be expected to occur in contexts of higher informativity than particle responses (such as 'yes'), which refer back to prior information only implicitly rather than restate it. Interactional features that Gipper includes as being more or less informative include prosodic design, addressee orientation, and overlap, as well as linguistic format. The statistical analysis based on 183 RfRC sequences reveals that repeats do not contribute to higher informativity, specifically that they are not associated with information rate reduction. Individual features, such as marked prosodic design and avoidance of overlap, appear to play a role in indexing news as informative.

Following on from their earlier work on German *echt* (English 'really'), **Gubina and Betz** (2025) investigate the use of the German negative discourse particles *nein/nee/nö* (English 'no') in response to new information. They develop earlier conceptualizations of the newsmark category, firstly, by showing that they can respond not only to verbal informings but also to embodied actions that in some way affect newsmark-speakers' knowledge or understanding. Secondly, for two of the items (*nein, nee*) the authors reveal two distinct responsive actions. *Nein* and *nee* can receipt new information with a surprised or negative affective stance; or, where they follow new information that was framed grammatically with negation, they can request reconfirmation of the prior informing. In the latter case, they do so from a knowing, and thus challenging position. The authors identify the turn design features of each, showing the complex interplay between lexical, grammatical, prosodic, and sequence-organizational factors.

**Weber and König** (2025) compare newsmarks and change-of-state tokens in two varieties of German: the near-standard variety North-West High German and the dialect variety Westphalian Low German. Methodologically and conceptually their contribution combines variational pragmatics with interactional linguistics, demonstrating opportunities for cross-fertilization for both. The quantitative analysis reveals regional as well as generational differences in the use and frequency of specific tokens; for example, their data show *ja* ('yes') to be the dominant German newsmark for older speakers, while *echt* ('really') is the predominant newsmark for younger, near-standard speakers. Low German speakers use *achso* ('oh I see') more frequently. Here, the interaction analysis reveals a continuum from the use of *achso* as in-between a change-of-state token and a newsmark, receiving new information and treating it as sufficient and fully processed, and a proper newsmark function that indexes surprise. The two uses are associated with different pitch patterns (rise-fall vs. rise). Finally, the paper touches upon the role of speaker effects on newsmark usage, revealing that some speakers in the data set have their own 'signature newsmarks'.

**Marmorstein and Shor** (2025) explore the use of the newsmark *be'emet* (lit. 'in truth') in Hebrew conversation. Building on earlier work (Marmorstein and Szczepek-Reed 2023), they identify the attribution of remarkability to the prior speaker's informing as the generic function of *be'emet* across contexts. The authors suggest that the crucial factor that underlies inferences about the local relevancy of *be'emet* is the epistemic and social positioning of the participants. They distinguish between cases in which recipients accept or contest the epistemic primacy claimed by the informer. In the former case, recipients can employ *be'emet* to reinforce their alignment with the informers, especially if remarkability was already proposed by the informer. If, on the other hand, the proposal originates with the recipient, it becomes a matter to be ratified or rejected by the informer in their next turn. A proposal of remarkability

can also be heard as casting doubt on the informing. In these cases recipients have competing claims to knowledge and they employ *be'emet* to withhold acceptance of the informing or challenge it. The authors conclude that lack of specificity is an affordance of a response via *be'emet* since it opens up the possibility of combinedly dealing with other exigencies established by the larger activity, as well as allowing for an off-record negotiation of epistemic disalignment.

## 5 Contributions to the special issue

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