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Negation in Context: Non-Literal Interpretation of Novel Metaphors in Russian

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Abstract
This study aimed to show that, as in Hebrew, in Russian too, negation generates nonliteral interpretations by default. Three experiments tested the interpretation of negative utterances of the form "X is not Y". The first experiment compared novel and conventional metaphors presented outside a specific context. Results showed that both familiar utterances (*He is not my son*) and unfamiliar ones (*This is not a court of law*) were interpreted nonliterally. The second experiment examined the set of novel metaphors only. This time participants were asked to rate the appropriateness of the interpretations provided, which ranged between metaphorical and literal. Results showed that negative utterances were more metaphorical (M=4.94 SD=0.88) than their affirmative counterparts (M=2.70 SD= 0.85). In the third experiment the novel negative utterances were embedded in strong contexts, either biased toward the literal or toward nonliteral interpretation of the targets. Reading times of the negative utterances in their respective contexts were measured. Results did replicate previous findings (in Hebrew) testifying to the temporal priority of the nonliteral interpretation. Rather, in Russian, the literal and nonliteral interpretations took similarly long to read.

How people process statements containing negation remains an open question in the field of linguistics.

Several recent theories claim that negated items are eliminated from mental representation during the initial stages of processing (500-1000ms following their offset) and posit a 'suppression operator' at work.

Hasson & Glucksberg (2006), for example, in their online study, presented subjects with statements of the type '*X is/is not Y*' (e.g., '*This lawyer is a shark*', '*This lawyer is not a shark*').

After the statement disappeared from the screen, subjects were presented with a pair of words, one of which has an affirmative-related meaning while the other has a negative-related meaning (e.g. *vicious/gentle*). The subjects were to decide which word was appropriate to the statement she had just read. They found that in the early stages of representation (150 and 500ms), the choice of affirmative statements was facilitated, even by those who had read the negative statements. In later stages (1000ms), the negative-related stages were not accessible to memory. These results lead authors to conclude that during the initial stages of comprehension, negation is actually presented as affirmation.

MacDonald and Just (1989) argue that there is a difference in the mental representation of negative as opposed to affirmative statements. In their study, subjects were presented with a statement containing two items, one a negated item and one an affirmative item (e.g., '*Almost every weekend, Elizabeth baked some bread but no cookies*'). After that, they read a sentence like '*Elizabeth baked some bread*' or '*Elizabeth baked some cookies*' and were asked to decide if the sentence was true or false. It was found that the participants had more difficulties with negated items as compared to the affirmative ones. The authors state that the fact that the negated items were still on the subjects' minds, leads them conclude that 'they could not have emerged had negated information been either initially inaccessible or initially accessible but rendered inaccessible later on due to suppression processes assumed obligatory following negation' (MacDonald & Just, 1989).

However, once enough processing time is allowed, negation results in suppression of negated concepts, so that negated items are either discarded from the mental representation altogether or replaced by an available opposite. This unstable nature of interpreting negation can probably be explained by the fact that understanding negation includes consideration of an alternative situation. The negation markers only shift the focus to the actual state of affairs. This model of interpreting situations was presented by studies of text understanding (Glenberg and Mathew, 1992; Glenberg et al, 1987; Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998; Zwaan et al 2002).

The findings of Kaup et al. (2006) support the view that in the process of comprehension, there is a certain 'tipping point' when our attention shifts away from the negated state of affairs

onto the actual state of affairs. The shift of focus onto the actual state of affairs takes a certain amount of time. Kaup et al. (2006) presented subjects with positive and negative sentences in isolation and a picture of actual and counterfactual state of affairs and then with a picture of either an actual or counterfactual state of affairs. When the pictures were shown 750 ms after reading the sentences, the visual answers matched the meaning of the positive phrases but not the negative one. After 1500ms, the result was opposite. The authors conclude that the findings support the view that there is a certain 'tipping point' in the process of comprehension when our attention shifts away from the negated state of affairs onto the actual state of affairs. Thus the focus on the actual state of affairs takes certain time.

A similar study was carried out by Kaup in 2001(2001). In that study, subjects also had a self-paced reading of statements whose sentences contained both negative and affirmative items (e.g. 'Almost every weekend, Mary bakes some bread but no cookies' and 'Elizabeth tided up her drawers. She burned the old letters but not the photographs'). In this experiment, probes were presented 2.5sec after the end of each statement. Consistent with the MacDonald and Just (1989) study, the results showed that matching negative probes took significantly more time. Another finding was that when the visual representation of the negated term was absent from the scene and the non-negated term was present, the response latencies were the longest (the example of Mary). But when the negated term was present and the non-negated one was absent, the difference in response latencies between the affirmative and the negative terms was smaller (the example of Elizabeth).

Findings also show that when sufficient processing time (1500ms) is allowed, negated concepts are often replaced by an alternative opposite (Kaup, Lüdtke, & Zwaan, 2006), should it be available (Mayo, Schul, & Burnstein, 2004). Thus, while 750msec following its offset, open in not open lost initial levels of activation. However, after an additional 750 msec, it was replaced by an opposite - "closed" (Kaup et al., 2006). Similarly, between 150-500 msec following their offset, negated and non-negated concepts (not a rocket /a rocket) were both represented as "fast", but at 1000ms following their offset, their initial levels of activation were preserved following affirmative contexts only, in which this meaning was

contextually compatible. Following negative targets, however, their initial levels of activation were reduced to baseline levels.

Ferguson, Sanford, & Leuthold (2008) report a study consisting of two experiments in which they explored the role of context in perception of negation. The first experiment used an eye movement technique to discover if there is a difference between matching negated and non-negated words that had appeared in a prior context with a congruent and a incongruent sentence. The results of this experiment showed that participants' eye movement behavior revealed no influence of the negated discourse on the initial stages of the target sentence processing. The situation, however, was different in the later stages. The authors suggest that longer reading times reflect subjects' attempts to relate the new information to the wider discourse context. Another experiment in this study was an ERP measurement. Here again, it was shown that there is a delay in negative context influence. Results revealed that the mental presentation is not updated immediately but rather, it requires time to compare the incoming information with the real world situation. This conclusion is consistent with other investigations on the topic (Giora, 2006; Horn, 2001; Israel, 2004; Jespersen, 1924; and Pearce & Rautenberg, 1987)

An alternative view to the suppression hypothesis – the suppression/retention hypothesis - has been proposed by Giora and colleagues. This view argues that suppression following negation is not obligatory, but rather is sensitive to discourse goals and requirements. Information will be disposed of when it is deemed unnecessary or obstructive, regardless of negation. In this respect, negation is not different from affirmation - both might lead to suppression or retention of concepts depending on specific contextual information and the speaker's intent (Giora, 2006).

In their study of lexical decision, Giora et al. (2005a) presented subjects with affirmative and negative statements of the type '*X is/is not Y*' (e.g., *'The instrument is sharp' and 'The instrument is not sharp'*). After 100ms, subjects were to decide whether the target word ('*sharp'*) was consistent with its affirmative/negated meaning. And in this initial stage the affirmative probe word ('*piercing'*) was chosen.

Thus, according to Giora and colleagues (Giora, 2006; Giora, Fein at al., 2007), both negated and non-negated concepts can either maintain their initial levels of activation or allow their gradual reduction up to baseline levels and below, depending on discourse factors (the suppression/retention hypothesis, Giora, 2003). As opposed to the received view, then, in this

respect, negation and affirmation are not different; they do not exhibit asymmetric effects even when later processes are involved (Giora 2006, 2007; Giora, Balaban et al., 2005; Giora, Fein et al., 2005).

Indeed, more recent studies have shown that when negated concepts are not presented in isolation but rather are embedded in a supportive context, they need not be suppressed and replaced by an alternative. They can be retained if deemed useful for the unfolding context. Thus, when negated concepts (e.g., '*The train to Boston was **no rocket'***) were then followed by a relevant context discussing the same discourse topic (*the trip to the city was fast, though*), their so-called contextually inappropriate interpretation (*fast*) was not discarded from the mental representation. Instead, it remained accessible at least as long as 1000msec following their offset. In contrast, when followed by an irrelevant context, these interpretations were hampered. Similarly, when embedded in a supportive prior context, (e.g., ***millionaires*** in '*I live in the neighborhood of **millionaires** who like only their own kind. Nonetheless on Saturday night, I also invited to the party at my place a woman who is not **wealthy'**,* negated concepts (***wealthy***) preserved their accessibility as long as 750 msec following their offset (Giora, Fein, Aschkenazi, & Alkabets-Zlozover, 2007).

It is precisely this persisting accessibility of negated information that allows negation to affect its representation in various ways. For instance, negated concepts have been shown to induce mitigation of their interpretations such that "not pretty", for instance, was represented as "less than pretty" rather than as "ugly". In addition, compared to affirmative modifiers (*almost*) negation is a rather strong mitigator, representing a weaker or more hedged version of the affirmative (Giora, Balaban, Fein, Alkabets, 2005). Negated concepts have also been shown to be represented as mitigated versions of their alternative opposites, so that "not pretty" was represented as a hedged version of "ugly" (Fraenkel & Schul, 2008). However, when negating an end of the scale member of the set ("not very pretty"), mitigation via negation invited an ironic interpretation even out of a specific context (Giora et al, 2005).

How do people make sense of the affirmative counterparts of these statements? What do the default context affirmative utterances ,(such as '*I am your maid'*; '*This is food')*, activate to render these statements plausible? As will be seen later, to render such statements meaningful, speakers often activate a context in which the predicate (*your maid*; *food*) is related to the topic ("I", "This") in a literal way, that is, in a way that also communicates or assumes metaphor-

irrelevant meanings such as *a woman employed to do certain jobs* and *foodstuff to be eaten* (Giora et al, 2010).

This paper attempts to define the role of context in metaphor interpretation. The hypothesis of the study is that context is an important factor in metaphor interpretation. That is, given that the metaphorical meaning of a well-known metaphor is the salient one, the more context prompts for the literal interpretation of a metaphor, the more likely it is that participants will choose the literal meaning over the metaphorical one. For example, a statement such as '*I am not your mom*' has two meanings. The literal meaning of the sentence is 'I *am not your biological mother*; I am not the one who gave birth to you'. The metaphorical meaning of the sentence is 'I *am not going to take care of you like your mother does*; *I am not going to look after you as if you were my baby*'. The prediction of the present study is that given no supportive context, the subjects will choose the latter, the metaphorical meaning. However, when a strong enough context is provided, the prediction of the study is that the participants will choose the meaning appropriate to the context. Two pieces of text specified below served as (1) literal and (2) metaphorical contexts for the statement '*I am not your maid'.*

Inna was sick and tired of reminding her roommates to clean the flat when it is their turns. When they once again asked Inna to do it alone, she replied: '*I'm not your maid'*. She also said she had to study for an exam she had to take the following week.

Dina had invited a woman to clean the flat for the week-end. When someone knocked on the door, she rushed out to open it and saw a woman there. Dina started to explain what she wanted cleaned when the woman said: '*I'm not your maid*'. She also said that she rented an apartment downstairs.

That is, given the statement '*I am not your maid'* said by Inna to her flat mates, subjects are expected to choose the metaphorical meaning of the phrase. On the contrary, given the second context, it is predicted that subjects will choose the literal meaning, as the context suggests.

A second aim of this paper was to investigate the processing of novel metaphors as compared to their well-known counterparts. The prediction is that novel metaphors are processed just like

existing metaphors. That is, given no supportive context, the participants would prefer themetaphorical meaning of a sentence over its literal counterpart.

Thus, participants reading a sentence like *'This is not a safe'* in the context specified below should choose the literal meaning of the phrase:

Vicky is going abroad for a week. She has heard a rumor that a flat in the next apartment block had been robbed and so she asks a friend to hide her jewelry in her bedroom closet. Lilia answers: 'This is not a safe'. Vicky thought about Lilia's words.

But having read the same phrase in the context like (2) below, the readers are predicted to choose for the opposite, ie., the metaphorical meaning of the phrase:

Vicky is telling her sister that she has made friends with Lilia and that she thinks she is a very reliable person. The sister answers Vicky: 'You might be wrong, this is not a safe'. Vicky thought about her sister's words.

Hence, the information within the scope of a negated item is supposed to be available since the participants are to decide which meaning is appropriate according to the context. That mental operation would not be possible if the particle 'not' were affected by a suppression operator.

The paper consists of three experiments, each designed to gradually uncover the role of context in metaphorical versus literal interpretations of statements. Experiments 1 and 2 provide no context and the participants are to decide which meaning of metaphor is the more salient one. Experiment 3 puts context in work.

Experiment 1

Method

The aim of Experiment 1 was to test the hypothesis that negation enhances metaphor-related properties. Specifically, it checks the prediction that, when having to decide whether a statement is intended either literally or metaphorically, participants will opt for the metaphorical interpretation when encountering a negative statement. They will be significantly less likely to do so when encountering its affirmative counterpart. This prediction is based on the study by Giora et al (2010) which showed that negation is an element that contributes to the nonliteral meaning of a metaphor. Affirmation, in its turn, is more widely used and, therefore, is more

likely to be associated with the literal meaning if no additional features (e.g., intonation, context, etc.) prompt another interpretation of a phrase.

Participants. Thirty-seven native speakers of Russian (23 women, 14 men), mean age 29.2 years old, volunteered to participate in the experiment.

Materials. Materials were a modified version of the items used in Giora et al. (2010) translated into Russian. They included 32 context-less affirmatives ('You are my maid'; 'This is life') and their negative counterparts ('You are not my maid'; 'This is not life'). Two booklets were prepared so that each participant would be presented with only one item of a pair – either a negative or affirmative one. Each booklet contained 16 affirmative items, 16 negative items and 8 filler items, about half of which were negative (e.g. 'It's not evening yet', a phrase that in Russian means 'it's not late, we have time to do this').

Procedure. Participants were instructed to decide whether each of the items communicates a literal or a metaphorical interpretation. Each participant received an electronic version of one of the booklets and was to answer it at once. Subjects were also asked to fill in their personal data at the beginning of the session. The subjects were instructed to read and answer the questions at a self-paced rate.

Results. According to the prediction, the subjects were more likely to judge negative phrases as metaphorical than as literal when compared to their positive counterparts (positive: 3.16 [0.80] versus negative: 5.30 [1.08]). The difference was significant by both subject (t1) and item (t2) analyses, (t1 (31) =10.68, p<.0001; t2 (14) =9.37, p<.0001).

Thus, the results replicate those of Giora et al. (2010) and support the view that negation induces metaphorical interpretation.

Experiment 2
Method

Experiment 2 was designed to check whether or not the results obtained in *Experiment 1* were due to the fact that metaphorical meanings of the items were more common than their literal ones. A set of novel metaphors was checked and compared to the set of well-known statements used in the previous experiment.

Participants. Forty-five students of the Newman Center College in Tel Aviv, all native speakers of Russian (30 women, 11 men), mean age 38.2 years old, volunteered to participate in the experiment.

Only novel metaphors were used for the experiment. A pre-test was run to check the novelty of the items. Fifteen participants of the pre-test were shown 2 booklets of 15 pairs of novel metaphors together with 16 control ones. They were to rate the metaphors on a 7-point familiarity scale. Number 1 on the scale represented "Not familiar at all" and number 7 for "Highly familiar" answer. Each participant saw only one set of items – either the negative or positive counterpart. The results of the pre-test revealed that both the negative and the positive metaphors were equally novel – M=2.69 (0.88) for positive and M=2.59 (0.92) for negative metaphors; $t1_{(25)} < 1$, n.s., $t2 = _{(14)} < 1$, n.s.

Materials. Fifteen pairs of novel metaphors were selected on the basis of a pretest (see below) and served as the experimental items of this experiment. The items that served as fillers for the pre-test were the fillers for the experiment.

Pretest. A pre-test was run to check the novelty of the items to insure that only novel metaphors would be used in the experiment. Fifteen participants were presented with 2 booklets of 15 negative/affirmative pairs of presumably novel metaphors together with 16 presumably negative/affirmative conventional metaphors. They were to rate the metaphors on a 7 point familiarity scale. Number 1 on the scale represented "Not familiar at all" and number 7 represented "Highly familiar". Each participant saw only one version of the items – either their negative or affirmative counterpart. The results of the pre-test showed that both the negative and the affirmative versions of the target metaphors were equally novel – M=2.69 (0.88) for affirmative and M=2.59 (0.92) for negative metaphors; $t1_{(25)} < 1$, n.s., $t2 = _{(14)} < 1$, n.s.

Procedure. Participants were to decide to what extent the statements were literal or metaphorical on a 7- point scale where 1 on the scale stood for the most literal and number 7 the most metaphorical one. This time the participants were presented with a hard copy of one of the two sets and were allowed as much time as they needed, but were instructed not to think too much about the options,but rather to select the first interpretation that seemed to best fit a given statement.

This is not Memorial Day

No need to be   so sad
today

We are not celebrating Memorial Day
today
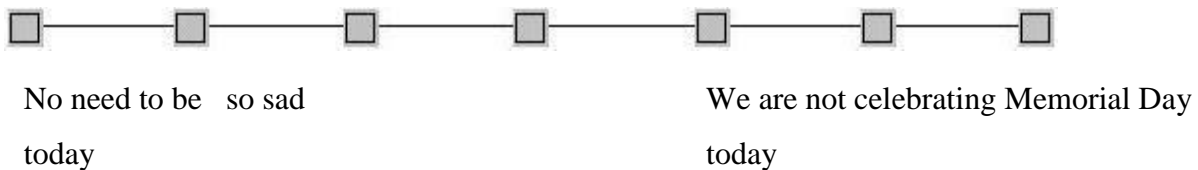
Results. The results of the experiment showed that negative phrases were more likely to be judged as metaphorical (M=4.94 (0.88)) than their affirmative counterparts (M=2.70 (0.85)) and the difference was significant by both subject and item analysis (t1 (39) =12.34, p<.000; t2 (13) =10.77, p<.0001).

These findings are consistent with the results of the first experiment and further support the view that the metaphorical, rather than the literal, interpretation of negated items is their default interpretation. This time, too, it can be seen that affirmative items received literal interpretations more often than do metaphorical ones.

Experiment 3

To further explore the role of context in metaphor interpretation, another experiment was conducted. This time the participants were presented with a novel metaphor in negation, used for the previous experiments, and only one pair of the context. The participants' task was to answer a yes/no question that immediately followed the text. The answer to the question shows how the participants interpret the meaning of the sentence, that is, literally or metaphorically. According to the Graded Salience Hypothesis, the context should facilitate either a literal or a metaphorical

interpretation. The prediction was that participants would choose a literal meaning of the sentence when the context facilitates the literal interpretation and the metaphorical meaning would be chosen when the context points to the metaphor in negation.

Method. In Experiment 3, unlike the two previous experiments, six statement pieces of context were provided. The novel metaphors used in Ex 2 were embedded in the context such that they were followed by another sentence to avoid a spill-over effect.

Materials. Fifteen pairs of the novel metaphors used in Ex 2 served as the experimental items of this experiment. The items that served as fillers for Ex2 were used as fillers for the experiment.

Procedure. Subjects that took part in Experiment 3 were students of Newman Center College in Tel Aviv who had not participated in the previous experiments and not presented to the materials of the study. Each of the subjects was handed only with one part of the two questionnaires and thus read only one pair of the literal/metaphorical types of context.

To run the experiment, a special computer program was used. The program was installed on a laptop so that each participant would answer the questionnaire individually. The program was designed to measure the time taken by every participant to answer each question. First, the subjects were presented with the instructions and then they filled in their personal data to be used in the analysis. This was followed by the questionnaire itself, in the form of unveiling sentences designed for the participant to read a short story. Following the text, the subject was faced with a yes/no question and was instructed to push either the "L" or "D" button to answer "no" or "yes" respectively. All the subjects were instructed to read the text and the question at their own pace. It was made clear that there were no right answers to the question and that only the subjects' personal opinions counted. An example of a short story is given below:

Vera was sent to an eye specialist. She enters the examination room and sees a woman inside. Vera says 'Hello' and holds out her magnetic card. The woman in the room says: 'I am not your doctor'. They continued talking.

Q- Did Vera meet with a doctor?

a. yes

b. no

Every piece of context contained an equal number of sentences (6) and the question provided for the yes/no answers were identical for both literal/metaphorical pairs used in the experiment. The target sentence in the text was always placed one sentence before the question to avoid a spillover effect.

Results.

Data of 4 participants were discarded from the analysis since they scored above 3 SD from the mean of each participant. The analysis for correct answers of the participants are the following: mean score for literal sentences: M=1.66, SD= 0.37; and for the metaphorical ones: M= 1.64, SD= 0.42. Unfortunately, no significant difference between literal and metaphorical items was found in the context experiment: t1(39)<1, n.s and t2t(13)<1, n.s The results for spillover segments showed that no spillover effects were visible for M1(literal) and M2 (metaphorical) items: M1=1.90 (SD=0.81) and M2=1.93 (SD=0.83); t1(39)<1, n.s.; t2(135)<1, n.s.

The results of the third experiment did not show a significant difference in metaphorical versus literal interpretation of statements. They are also different from the two previous experiments' results. It would be interesting to identify why the results differ. Perhaps the form of the experiment, itself, led to confusions. The results of two left -handed participants were excluded due to an overall wrong interpretation, that is, they may have confused the hands and for this reason got most of the answers wrong as compared to right-handed participants.

General Discussion

The first two experiments of the study support the view that negative items are still available for mental representation and that the information in the scope of negation is processed and analyzed. The only difference between the positive and the negated information is the time required to perceive its salience.

The Suppression Hypothesis did not find support in this study. Instead, the Graded Salience Hypothesis gained more support in that the same prediction works for a language other than

Hebrew and English. The fact that the context-based experiment did not reveal significance in metaphor interpretation demands further exploration. Possible explanations include the possibility that participants did not feel free with the answer system and that some of them may have confused the buttons for yes/no answers. If the technical reason is the only problem it can be solved and the questionnaires can be tested again with other subjects.

As a native speaker of Russian, I can make a point about the form of the statements used in the experiment. The 'X is/ is not Y' used in Giora et al (2010) works well both in English and Hebrew, but when it comes to Russian, there is another form that better conveys the meaning of such metaphors. Thus the phrase 'Ty mne ne mama' meaning 'You are not a mom to me' provides a better metaphorical meaning than the 'Ty ne moya mama' meaning 'you are not my mom' used in the experiments. The prediction is that the phrase of the type 'You are not a Mom to me' should be taken as much more natural and more easily interpreted metaphorically. It would be interesting to test the difference between the two types of the phrases in Russian.

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Appendix 1

Target utterances of Experiment 2 (originally in Russian)
- This is not a discotheque.
- I am not your doctor.
- You are not a pilot.
- This is not a safe.
- I am not your social worker.
- I am not a refugee.
- I am not an unskilled labourer.
- This is not my grandma's house.
- I am not the president.
- This is not Memorial Day.
- This is not a court of law.
- I am not your messenger.

Appendix 2

Sample targets of Experiment 3 in biasing contexts (in bold) and spillover (the last sentence) segments (in italics). The unfolding text division is presented by / sighs.

L is for literal and *M* for metaphorical. Q- is for question.

- <u>I am not your doctor:</u>

L. Vera was sent to an eye specialist. / She enters the cabinet and sees a woman inside. / Vera says 'Hello' and holds out her magnetic card. /The woman in the room says: /**'I am not you doctor'**./ *They continued talking.*

Q- Did Vera meet a doctor?

a. yes
b. no

M. Vera often discusses her health condition with Lena. / This time again Vera begins complaining/ that she has a headache. / Then Lena answers: / **'I'm not your doctor'.** / *They continued talking*.

Q - Is Lena a doctor?
a. yes
b. no

- <u>This is not a safe</u>

L. Vicky is going abroad for a week. / She has heard a rumor that a flat in the neighbor block was robbed and so, / she asks the friend to hide the jewelry in her bedroom closet. / Lilia answers: / **'This is not a safe'**. *Vicky considered Lily''s words..*

Q- Did Vicky intend to trust Lily with her secrets?
a. yes
b. no

M. Vicky is telling to her sister about that / she made friends with Lilia / and thinks she is a very reliable person. / Sister answers to Vicky: /"You might be wrong, /**this is not a safe'**. / *Vicky considered her sister's words*.

Q - Did Vicky intend to trust Lily with her secrets?
a. yes
b. no

- This is not my grandma's house

L. Gala told Lena several times about the house where Gala's grandma lived. / Recently Lena found herself not far from where there the house must have been. / Next day when Lena described the house to Gala / she replied: / **'This is not my grandma's house'**. /*Lena admitted that her friend must be right.*

Q- Could Lena mistake the house with the grandma's one?

a. yes
b. no

M. Lena invited Gala to her birthday. / They were drinking café in the kitchen and Lena said if there was anything else Gala wanted to have / she could look for it herself in the fridge. / Then Gala said: / **'This is not my grandma's house'.** / *Lena admitted that her friend must be right.*

Q- Could Lena mistake her house with her grandma's one?

a. yes
b. no