“Fine” or “Okay”—Which is it?

Exploring the Pragmatic Differences of “Fine” and “Okay” as Response Particles

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Abstract. In this paper, I explore the difference of meanings of the response particles “fine” and “okay” based on the particles’ antecedents and the responses’ scalarity—that one response is more “positive” or “negative” (or even more “neutral”) than the other. This is based on the assertion that choosing to use one of these responses over the other is the result of some difference in meaning and therefore using one response over another conveys a different meaning:

a. Arthur would you like to go to the park?
   a. Fine.
   b. Okay.

b. Julia is coming over tonight for dinner.
   a. Fine.
   b. Okay.

The particular research question is whether the differences in meanings are based primarily on different antecedents or different scalarities. There is a possibility that semantically, the words are too similar to have any significant pragmatic difference, and the meaning of the response comes about with the use of different inflection or other paralinguistic devices, but I believe that there is a difference in linguistic meaning. I hypothesize that the difference in meaning will be the result of difference in response scalarity—which results in the particular use of either response for different antecedents.

Using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (CoCA), I compare what they are usually in response to, how this use can result in (or be the result of) their meanings, and further articulate their meanings (particularly in terms of the notion of response scalarity). The antecedents are categorized broadly by clause-type, as being either a question, assertion, commissive, or imperative. The frequency of the particle is also recorded for further analysis. All the while, any significant patterns are noted and considered.
References.

