

Suggestive interrogatives

English has *suggestive interrogatives*, non-cannonical negative *why* interrogatives with directive force as in (1), used to perform speech acts of suggestion.

- (1) Why don't you take a left at the light.

Suggestive interrogatives were subject to some investigation in the 1970s (Sadock 1974, Green 1975) but have not received an explicit analysis, have not been examined cross linguistically, and remain poorly understood. Suggestive interrogatives like (1) are distinguished from *why* questions by a set of descriptive generalizations about both form and interpretation. This paper proposes an analysis of English suggestive interrogatives in as a dedicated clause type, relating their conventional force to a set of descriptive generalizations, some new and some old, about their form, distribution, and interpretation. I show that suggestive interrogatives are not “indirect speech acts”, are not instances of negative *why* questions, and do not involve an imperative (e.g. *you take a left at the light!*). I propose, instead, that they are formed from a grammaticalized force marker *why don't* that combines with a subjunctive complement, and argue that the descriptive generalizations follow.

Descriptive generalizations

Some *why*-interrogatives, such as (2), are ambiguous between a suggestive and question interpretation.

- (2) Why don't you move to England./?

The following generalizations, however, sharply distinguish suggestive interrogatives from *why*-questions.

PRESUPPOSITION: While *why*-interrogatives presuppose the truth of the proposition they ask about (the *question radical*) and ask for reasons or explanations for its truth, suggestive interrogatives presuppose that the truth of the proposition they suggest (the *prejacent*) is metaphysically unsettled. For example, (3a) presupposes that you don't look like her, whereas (3b) (on the suggestive construal) presupposes that whether you look at her or not is unsettled at time of utterance.

- (3) a. Why don't you look like her?
b. Why don't you look at her.

OBLIGATORY CONTRACTED NEGATION: unlike *why*-interrogatives, suggestive interrogatives require negation, and negation must be contracted.

- (4) a. Why don't you have an apple. (suggestion, = please have an apple)
b. #Why do you have an apple. (question, ≠ please don't have an apple)
c. *Why do not you have an apple.
d. Why do you not have an apple? (question, ≠ please have an apple)

SUGGESTION PARTICLES: Suggestive interrogatives, but not *why*-interrogatives, are compatible with suggestion-marking particles like *here* and *please*.

- (5) a. Why don't you please sit down. (suggestion)

- b. *Why didn't you please sit down? (question)
- c. Here, why don't you take this pen. (suggestion)
- d. *Here, why don't you like chocolate? (question)

POLARITY: Despite containing negation, suggestive interrogatives fail to license polarity items, whereas *why*-interrogatives do.

- (6) a. Here's my suggestion: why don't you tell someone / *anyone about this.
- b. Here's my question: why don't you tell someone / anyone about this?

PRESENT TENSE: Suggestive interrogatives are restricted to the simple present, whereas *why*-interrogatives are not.

- (7) a. Why don't / *didn't / *won't / *aren't you please have some beer.
- b. Why don't / didn't / won't / aren't you have(ing) any beer?

AGENT CONTROL: Since suggestive interrogatives make suggestions, their prejacent can only describe things that are under an agent's control. Questions have no such limitation.

- (8) a. #Why don't you win the game / be taller.
- b. Why don't you win any games?
- c. Why aren't you taller?

Finally, while suggestive interrogatives have directive force, they can be used to perform only a subset of the speech acts that are available to imperatives. In particular, they cannot not be used to issue commands, make wishes, or give permission.

- (9) a. (#Why don't you) shoot, that's an order. (COMMAND)
- b. Context: on the way to the coffee shop early in the morning.
(#Why don't you) please have wifi! (WISH)
- c. Context: you are nagging me to go outside. ok, ok! (#why don't you) go outside. (PERMISSION).

Proposal: My proposal is to treat English suggestive interrogatives as a special clause type, alongside imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives. Specifically, I propose that suggestive interrogatives consist structurally of two parts:

- A grammaticalized *why*+*neg* force indicating device introducing directive force.
- A “mandative subjunctive” clause (Aarts 2012).

First, the contrast between (10a) and (10b) shows that suggestive questions do not involve subject-aux inversion, and hence that they cannot be negative *why*-interrogatives, i.e. *why*-questions with a negative question radical. This is consistent with (though does not explain) the contraction facts, as matrix negation need not be contracted (compare (10c) with (10d))

- (10) a. (If you want to be safe,) why don't you be there early.
- b. *You don't be there early.
- c. Why do you not eat anything?
- d. *Why do you not eat something.

If suggestive interrogatives are not negative *why*-interrogatives, then that rules out an analysis in which their suggestive force is not conventional but an indirect speech act performed by uttering a negative *why* question. Suggestive interrogatives are also not receive an embedded imperative analysis. That is, their structure cannot be [*why* don't you [*imp* go home]] or [*why* [*imp* don't you go home]]. These structures are ruled out by examples like (11a) and (11b), which show that the radical is not a possible imperative.

- (11) a. Why don't you not respond to them. (*you not respond to them!).
b. Why don't I go there with you. (*you not respond to them!)

Instead, I propose that suggestive interrogatives consist of a conventionalized *why*+NEG force indicator device and a subjunctive clause. The force indicated by *why*+NEG is *suggestive* force, a specific force that is closely related to directive force.

While English does not have inflectional mood, it is by now widely accepted that it has so-called subjunctive clauses. These are non-imperative clauses headed by the base form of the verb and appearing in the complement of certain verbs like *suggest* or *demand* (Aarts 2012).

- (12) I suggest / require [you go home].

The literature on the mandative subjunctive in English does not, as far as I am aware, discuss its interpretation. For simplicity, assume that subjunctive clauses include a subjunctive operator SUBJ and a tenseless preajacent proposition. For example, the logical form of the embedded clause in (12) is (13).

- (13) SUBJ(you-go-home)

I propose that SUBJ presupposes that the proposition denoted by its preajacent is metaphysically unsettled (and hence also unsettled in the common ground), and encodes addressee preference for its realization. The interpretation of the complement clause in (13), for example, is the proposition that the you prefer the proposition *you-be-home* to its negation. *Preference* here is conceived as Condoravdi and Lauer's (2012) notion of *effective preferences*. Effective preferences are action-guiding preferences, and differ from bouletic preferences in that they must cohere with each other (as one cannot act on contradictory preferences). The *why*+NEG operator selects for subjunctive complement. When the subjunctive complement contains a subject (e.g. *you be there early*, *do-support* is triggered, otherwise not (cf. *why not go home*). The presence of *do-support* is suggestive interrogatives, unexplained in the literature, remains unexplained here. The *why*+NEG operator encodes directive force, modeled, again following Condoravdi and Lauer, as committing the speaker to an effective preference for the addressee to prefer the subjunctive proposition. The interpretation of (14) is then as in (15), where $PEP_a(p)$ means that an agent *a* publicly commits to an effective preference for *p*.

- (14) Why don't you go home.

- (15) a. $\llbracket \text{why don't} \rrbracket = \lambda p. \lambda w. PEP_{sp}(p)$
b. $\llbracket \text{you go home} \rrbracket = \mathbf{subj}(\text{ad-go-home}) = \lambda w. EP(\text{ad}, \text{ad-go-home})$
c. $\llbracket \text{why don't you go home} \rrbracket = \lambda w. PEP_{sp}(EP(\text{ad}, \text{ad-go-home}))$

Combined, suggestive interrogatives commit the speaker publicly to an effective preference that the addressee form an effective preference for the proposition that is the preajacent of the subjunctive. In (14), the speaker commits publicly to a preference that you form a preference to go home. This is

the main difference between suggestive force and the directive force of imperatives: suggestive force commit the speaker to a preference for an action by the addressee, whereas directive force commits her to a preference for the addressee to form a preference. This distinction is meant to capture the intuition that suggestions, unlike directives, communicate that the speaker wants the addressee to act on their own, rather than the speaker's, preferences.

This analysis predicts the POLARITY generalization, as there is no licensing environment in the pre-jacent of the suggestive operator to license NPIs. The NEGATION generalization is, on this analysis, part of the grammaticalized form of the suggestive force operator. The full talk discusses why negation should be part of such a grammaticalization. The UNSETTLEDNESS generalization follows from the fact that the suggestive force operator selects for a subjunctive clause, which always features an unsettled pre-jacent. This selection is, in turn, due to the inherently future-oriented nature of directive, and hence also of suggestive, force, which Condoravdi and Lauer model as an . Suggestions are about action choice, and one cannot make choices about actions that have already been taken (cf. The SPEECH ACTS generalization follows from the property of suggestive force that distinguishes it from directive force. The suggestive *why*+NEG operator commits the speaker to a preference for the addressee to form a preference to act, but commands and wishes, by definition, do not involve an addressee preference (commands ignore addressee preferences, wishes do not have an addressee), whereas permission presupposes that addressee preference is settled, conflicting with SETTLEDNESS.

References:

- Aarts, Bas. 2012. The subjunctive conundrum in English. *Folia Linguistica* 46/1: 1–20.
- Condoravdi, Cleo, and Sven Lauer. 2012. Imperatives: Meaning and illocutionary force. *Empirical issues in syntax and semantics* 9:37–58.
- Green, Georgia. 1975. How to get people to do things with words. *Syntax and semantics* 3:107–141.
- Sadock, Jerold. 1974. *Towards a linguistic theory of speech acts*. New York: Academic Press.