Suggestive Questions

Itamar Francez

Minor Sentence Types, Lisbon 2025

English suggestive interrogatives

Non-cannonical negative *why* interrogatives used to make suggestions, not to ask questions.

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

- Are suggestive interrogatives just negative *why*-questions? If not, what are they?
- Why can they be used to make suggestions, but not ask questions?
- What does it mean to "suggest"?

My goals

- Point out a host of properties, formal and interpretative, that distinguish suggestive interrogatives from negative *why*-interrogatives and that any analysis must explain.
- Propose an analysis.

Main claims

- There is no negation in the interpretation of suggestive interrogatives.
- *why don't* is a conventionalized force marker that embeds a subjunctive clause and encodes suggestive force.

Outline

1 Descriptive generalizations and explananda

2 Two obvious analyses that don't work

3 So what *are* suggestive interrogatives

A1: No subject-aux inversion

why-interrogatives are formed with subject-aux inversion from declaratives. Suggestive interrogatives are not.

(2) Why don't you look like her?

(3) You don't look like her.

(4) Why don't you be there early tomorrow.

(5) *You don't be there early tomorrow.

A2: Presupposition

why-questions presuppose the truth of the question radical. Suggestive interrogatives presuppose that what they are suggesting is an unsettled issue.

(6) Why don't you look like her?
     (∂: you don't look like her)

(7) Why don't you look at her.
     (∂: unsettles whether you will look at her.)

B1: Obligatory negation

Unlike *why*-interrogatives, suggestive interrogatives require negation.

(8) a. Why don't you have an apple. (suggestion to have an apple)
    b. # Why do you have an apple? (#suggestion to not have an apple)

B2: Obligatory contraction

Unlike in *why*-interrogatives, in suggestive interrogatives negation must be contracted.

(9) a. *Why do not you have an apple.
    b. Why do you not have an apple? (ok question, #suggestion to have an apple)

C: Suggestion particles

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

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

      b. *Why didn't you please sit down? (question)

(11)   a. Here, why don't you take this pen. (suggestion)

      b. *Here, why don't you like chocolate? (question)

D: Polarity items

Suggestive interrogatives fail to license polarity items, whereas *why*-interrogatives do.

(12)   a. Why don't you tell someone / *anyone about this.
        b. Why didn't you tell someone / anyone about this?

Present tense

Suggestive interrogatives are restricted to the simple preset, whereas *why*-interrogatives are not.

(13) a. Here, why don't you borrow my car.

b. #Here, why didn't you borrow my car.

c. # Here, why won't you borrow my car.

d. # Here, why aren't you borrowing my car.

e. Why didn't / won't / aren't you borrow(ing) my car?

Agent control

Suggestive interrogatives, but not *why*-interrogatives, must be about thing under an agent's control.

(14)   a.   #Why don't you please win the game / be taller / look like me.

       b.   Why don't you win any games / look like me?

       c.   Why aren't you taller?

Outline

why+imperative

why [$_{imp}$ don't you open the door].

- Suggestive interrogatives clearly do not embed an imperative

(15) a. Why don't I lend you my bike.

b. *Don't I lend you my bike!

Indirect speech act

Suggestive interrogatives are *why*-interrogatives expressing suggestions as an indirect speech act.

(16)   a. Can you pass the smoked salmon?
           (Convention: You ask for something to be done by asking if the addressee can do it)

      b. Why don't you try the smoked salmon?
           (Convention: You suggest that something be done by rhetorically asking for reasons not to do it.)

- Suggestive interrogatives are not *why*-interrogatives and can't express questions.

    (17)   a. Why don't you be my editor.

          b. *You don't be my editor.

          c. *She is wondering why you don't be my editor?

Upshot: negation is not part of a clausal constituent

- Not part of a negative imperative embedded under *why*:
  x why [don't ...]

- Not part of a sentence radical ("raised" through subj-aux inversion):
  x [why [don't [you ....]]

Outline

1. Descriptive generalizations and explananda

2. Two obvious analyses that don't work

3. So what *are* suggestive interrogatives

A dedicated clause type for suggestions

[why don't] [you have a seat]

- *why+neg* is a grammaticalized "force indicating device".
- *why+neg* selects for the so-called *mandative subjunctive*, a non-root clause type of English.

 (18) a. I suggest / demand / request [you be there early]
    b. Why don't [you be there early]

The mandative subjunctive

encodes that the subject has an *effective preference* (Condoravdi and Lauer 2012) for some unsettled content.

(19) $[\![\text{you be there early}]\!] = \lambda w.EP(you, \text{you-be-there-early}) =$
You effectively prefer to be there early

Why+neg encodes directive force

Directive force is public speaker commitment to an effective preference.

(20) $[\![\text{why don't you be there early}]\!] =$
$\lambda w.PEP_{sp}(EP(\text{you}, \text{you-be-there-early}))$
'Speaker publicly commits to a preference that the addressee have a preference to be there early'

What does this capture and explain?

- Immediately captures the fact that suggestive interrogatives do not involve subject-aux inversion and do not presuppose a question radical (A1-2).
- Immediately explains why suggestive interrogatives do not license NPIs (no negation or other DE environment) (D).
- Negation and contraction are part of the conventionalized why+neg operator. (B1-2)
  — you might ask, *why* is the operator why+neg? (reasons against p vs. reason for ¬p)
- Immediate explanation for suggestion particles (C), present tense (E), and agent control (F) – these are all features of suggestions.

What is a suggestion?

A suggestion is a speaker's public commitment to a preference for their addressee to form a preference.

Suggestive interrogatives vs. imperatives

Suggestive interrogatives have only a subset of the uses of imperatives
No wish uses, no permission uses

- Imperatives: speaker preference for a proposition.
- Suggestive interrogatives: speaker preference for an addressee preference.

Conclusion

An analysis of suggestive interrogatives as a clause type conventionally encoding suggestive force, rather than as negative *why*-interrogatives, explains a host of their formal and interpretative properties.

Things left out for lack of space and time

The crosslinguistic picture: Hebrew also has suggestive interrogatives that are formally and intepreratively distinct from *why*-questions and, arguably, feature a *why+neg* operator.

Open mysteries

Syntax: Why do suggestive interrogatives feature *do*-support and contraction?