

# Polarity Items in Interrogatives

— A Postscript to Borkin (1971)

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Borkin (1971) established that the acceptability of negative polarity items (NPI, hereafter) in interrogative sentences is conditioned by the assumptions and expectations of the speaker. It is the purpose of this squib to demonstrate that the acceptability of NPI in interrogatives also depends on the illocutionary force that the interrogative sentence is taken to have. More precisely: NPI are unacceptable in interrogatives, under a given assignment of illocutionary force, if the speech act involved has an affirmative paraphrase.

Borkin herself notes interrogative *offers* like (1) which can be affirmatively paraphrased as (3) :

- (1) Won't you have some candy (qua *offer*)
- (2) \*Won't you have any candy (qua *offer*)
- (3) I offer you some candy

The same pattern emerges when we look at interrogative *requests* ('please' is used below to force the *request* interpretations):

- (4) { Won't  
Will } you go home sometime (please)
- (5) { Won't  
Will } you ever go home (\*please)
- (6) I request that you go home sometime
- (7) { Won't  
Will } you shut some of the windows (please)
- (8) { Won't  
Will } you shut any of the windows (\*please)
- (9) I request that you shut some of the windows
- (10) { Won't  
Will } you help at all (\*please)
- (11) I request that you help

As Lee (1973) has pointed out, an interrogative sentence like (12) can be interpreted as a *question* or as an affirmative *suggestion* (paraphrased in (14)), whereas the reduced form (13) can only have the latter interpretation:

- (12) Why don't you eat something
- (13) Why not eat something
- (14) I suggest that you eat something

If we employ NPI in (12) the affirmative *suggestion* interpretation disappears and

so, predictably, its reduced counterpart turns out to be unacceptable:

(15) Why don't you eat anything

(16) \*Why not eat anything

Likewise:

(17) Why don't you ever go home

(18) \*Why  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{not ever} \\ \text{never} \end{array} \right\}$  go home

(19) Why don't you teach at all

(20) \*Why not teach at all

Although 'why not' suggestions are *syntactically* negative, they are *pragmatically* affirmative and thus NPI cannot occur in them. 'Mercifully, a more thorough examination of such facts is beyond the scope of this paper.' (Borkin 1971: 61).

## REFERENCES

- Borkin, Ann. 1971. Polarity items in questions. Papers from the Seventh Regional Meeting. Chicago Linguistic Society. 53-62.
- Lee, Chungmin. 1973. The performative analysis of 'why not V?'. *Language Sciences* 25. 39-41.

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(Received March 10, 1977)