

The limits of questioning: negative interrogatives and hostile question content

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Abstract

This paper considers negative interrogatives—questions beginning with such frames as ‘Isn’t it’, ‘Don’t you’, ‘Shouldn’t you’ etc. — as limiting cases of ‘questioning’. Using data from news interviews, where questioning is mandatory and the boundary between questions and assertions can be highly sensitive and contested, it suggests that this form of interrogative is recurrently produced as, and treated as, a vehicle for assertions. Further while negative interrogatives are contested as ‘assertions’, statements accompanied by negative tags are not. This suggests that Bolinger’s (Bolinger, Dwight, 1957. *Interrogative Structures of American English*. University of Alabama Press, Alabama.) claim that the two formats are equivalent is incorrect. Some suggestions are offered as to why the two formats should be differentially treated in terms of their assertiveness. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science B.V.

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1. Introduction

In its most elementary form, a ‘question’ is a form of social action, designed to seek information and accomplished in a turn at talk by means of interrogative syntax. ‘Do you have the time?’ embodies this fusion of grammar and social action, and so does ‘What time is it?’ Interrogative syntax is the standard means of accomplishing the kind of social action — henceforth ‘questioning’—that seeks information, and it embodies a kind of social normativity that is frozen in grammar—a grammaticalized normativity.

However, it has long been recognized that this fusion of form and function is not without exceptions. There are two ways in which the grammar of interrogatives may not map on to the social action of questioning in this information seeking sense. First, questioning may be accomplished by other than interrogatively formed sentences. There are, for example, various forms of ‘declarative questions’. Some of

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these achieve their questioning status by means of rising intonation (Quirk et al., 1985), and others by making a statement about a ‘B-event’—some matter which the recipient has rights to know more about than the speaker (Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Heritage and Roth, 1995). Conversely, second, there are interrogatively framed turns at talk that ordinarily do not accomplish questioning in the sense of information seeking. Prominent among these are interrogatives designed to accomplish various forms of indirect speech acts (Levinson, 1983; Schegloff, 1988; Searle, 1975), where responses only briefly acknowledge their interrogative packaging (Schegloff, in press; Raymond, 2000). Then there are interrogatives that are designed to express outrage or accuse: ‘How could you....?’ is perhaps the prototypical exemplar of this type (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). And again there are interrogatives that accomplish something other than questioning by virtue of the sequential context in which they are deployed. Schegloff’s (1984) discussion of the utterance ‘By what standard’, deployed as an agreement, is a well known case in point.

The present paper considers another type of interrogative that is not always understood as questioning in the information seeking sense. This is the ‘negative interrogative’, exemplified by turns that begin with interrogative frames like ‘Isn’t it...’, ‘Doesn’t this...’, and ‘Don’t you...’. Such questions are quite commonly treated as expressing a position or point of view. For example in (1) below, Emma is calling to thank Margie for a lunch that Margie hosted. Emma then proceeds to compliment one of the other guests (line 7):

(1) [NB VII:1–2]

- 1 Emm: = Oh honey that was a lovely luncheon I shoulda ca:lled you
 2 s:soo [ːner but I]:[lo:ved it.Ih wz just deli:ghtfu [ːl. =
 3 Mar: [(f) Oh:::] [°()] [Well =
 4 Mar: = I wz glɑ[d y o u] (came).]
 5 Emm: [ˈnd yer f:] friends] ‘r so da:rli:ng, =
 6 Mar: = Oh:::[ː it wz:]
 7 Emm: -> [e-that Pa:t isn’she a do:ːll?]
 8 Mar: -> [iY e]h isn’t she pretty,
 9 (.)
 10 Emm: Oh: she’s a beautiful girl. =
 11 Mar: = Yeh I think she’s a pretty gir[l].
 12 Emm: [En that Reinam’n::

As Emma moves from an initial general assessment of Margie’s friends to one in particular (Pat), she formulates her assessment as a negative interrogative: “e-that Pa:t isn’she a do:ːll?” and this assessment is agreed with by Margie with an assertion (albeit downgraded [Pomerantz, 1984; Heritage, 2002] that is also accomplished through a negative interrogative: “iYeh isn’t she pretty”. This assessment is responded to in a turn that reasserts Emma’s earlier, and stronger, opinion. Here then both negative interrogatives are treated as accomplishing assertions of opinion, rather than questioning.

A related case is the following in which Lottie and her sister are beginning a discussion of Lottie's recent trip to Palm Springs:

(2) [NB IV.10.R:1]

- 1 Emm: .h How wz yer tri:p.
 2 Lot: Oh:: Go:d wonderful Emm[a],
 3 Emm: -> [Oh idn't beautiful do:wn the:re,
 4 Lot: Oh:: Jeeziz ih wz go:rgeous::
 5 Emm: Wh't a ni:ce wut time'djih git i:n. Jst a li'l whal ago?

Emma's initial inquiry about Lottie's trip is enthusiastically responded to (line 2), whereupon Emma deploys a negative interrogative to assess its destination, indexed as "do:wn the:re," which is in turn affirmatively endorsed with a second assessment from Lottie. It is evident that Emma's negative interrogative is deployed as an agreement which pre-emptively asserts a position about Palm Springs. This is further confirmed by the fact that Lottie's agreeing response at line 4 is oh-prefaced, and thus designed to reassert the primacy of her own experience of the location (Heritage, 2002). Moreover, as Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) have noted in their work on assessments, the contrast between the tenses used by the two speakers marks two distinct stances towards the item being assessed. Lottie, the speaker with the news, uses the past tense to index a specific experience on which her assessment is based, Emma uses the present tense to index a more generalized stance towards the location. In both these ways—the oh-preface and the contrast in tense—Lottie indexes contestation within agreement and, in both these ways, her understanding that Emma's negative interrogative was intended as an assertion.

According to Bolinger (1957), two elements of utterances like Emma's interrogative combine to make it 'assertive' rather than 'questioning'. First is the assumption that she has independent knowledge of the attractions of Palm Springs. Bolinger argues that this extralinguistic knowledge, often indexed by linguistic markers of various kinds—in this case, for example, the oh-preface to Emma's turn which, in the context of assessments, indexes prior and independent access to the referent (Heritage, 2002), contributes to what he calls its 'conduciveness'—the conveyed predisposition of the speaker to a particular kind of response (Bolinger, 1957: 99). It does so, Bolinger argued, by reversing the polarity of this negatively formulated question so as to convey an expectation for a positive response. Indeed, Bolinger argued that negative interrogatives like "Isn't it beautiful down there" are equivalent in conduciveness to positive assertions with negative tags such as "It's beautiful down there, isn't it?", though he suggests that the two questions are differentiated in terms of the explicitness with which the core proposition is conveyed (1957: 100). In a related discussion, Quirk et al. (1985: 825) describe similar questions as 'rhetorical'.¹

¹ See Koshik (1999, in press) for a further discussion of these sources and a more general treatment of the 'reverse polarity' aspects of negative interrogatives.

In what follows, we will examine negative interrogatives in a particular interactional context: the news interview. The news interview context is a particularly interesting context to study questioning practices. Because of an institutionalized preoccupation with journalistic ‘neutrality’ (Clayman, 1988, 1992; Heritage, 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1989; Clayman and Heritage, 2002), news interview participants are highly attuned both to whether a turn deploys interrogative syntax or not, and whether the turn is hearably engaged in questioning or, alternatively, asserting a point of view. Because of this characteristic, the news interview can be viewed as a kind of laboratory in which particular linguistic forms are ‘tested’ to their limits.² This paper reports on one such test.

2. News interview question design: a brief overview

News interview questions are produced under the auspices of an ideology of ‘neutrality’. According to this ideology, the interviewer is an impartial conduit through which information is elicited and channeled for an ‘overhearing audience’ (Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Heritage, 1985). Notwithstanding this, news interview questions are unavoidably ‘slanted’ in various ways (Heritage, 2002). In particular, news interview questions: (i) set agendas for responses by establishing topical domains and requesting recipients to perform various types of actions within those domains; (ii) assert propositions and establish presuppositions with varying levels of explicitness (Harris, 1986), and (iii) are frequently designed to ‘prefer’ (in a conversation analytic sense—Heritage, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987[1973]) particular interviewee responses.³ Although news interviewees may find aspects of interviewer questions problematic or objectionable at all three levels—why that topical agenda, why that presupposition, why design the question to prefer that answer—these sentiments rarely eventuate in challenges to the objectivity, impartiality or neutrality of questioners. In this way, interviewees collude in a fiction that questioning is objective, impartial and neutral in its import and that, as long as they stick to questioning, journalists cannot be criticized as biased promoters of a particular political or social agenda.

2.1. *Negative interrogatives in broadcast talk: initial observations*

Negative interrogatives embody a feature of question design that operates at the third level of questioning described above, the level of preference organization. Within the news context, they constitute a striking exception to the generally unchallenged fiction that interrogative syntax generally implements a neutral ‘question’ in search of information.

² See, for example, David Olsher’s (1996) dissection of the use of progressive aspect to discriminate between interviewer assertions that are designed to provide background for an upcoming question, and those which are designed as B-event statements that function as questions requiring response.

³ For parallel studies of question design in medical contexts, see Boyd and Heritage (in press) and Heritage (2002).

Although they clearly employ interrogative syntax, and apparently deploy that syntax in the interest of ‘questioning’, there is evidence from a range of contexts that neither questioners nor answerers treat negative interrogatives in these terms. For example, in the Senate Judiciary Hearings which led up to the vote on the impeachment of President Clinton, the following transpired during the examination of the Prosecutor’s Panel. The questioner is Senator Howard Cobel (Republican, North Carolina):

(3) [Senate Judiciary Committee Hearings 8 December, 1998]

1 Sen: Now lemme ask you this Mister Davis,
 2 (1.5)
 3 Sen: -> Would you:, (0.8) I started to say wouldn’t you,
 4 -> but then I’d be speaking for you.
 5 Would you acknowledge (0.5) that this committee’s
 6 consideration of whether grand jury perjury and several
 7 deposition perjury and potential witness tampering (0.3)
 8 by the president_ <I’m not saying it happened but assuming
 9 that it did, (0.8) that it merits (0.5) impeachment
 10 (.) is- is a legitimate exerci:se for this committee.
 11 Would you acknowledge that?

Here it appears that the Senator was on his way to asking ‘Wouldn’t you acknowledge that this committee’s consideration...’ where the remainder of the sentence complement (which is extensively revised in the course of the actual utterance) embodies what is clearly his opinion and that of the other Republican members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Catching this utterance before he began to produce it, he articulates his intention and acknowledges the excessive conduciveness of the intended question design as ‘speaking for you’, which he evidently intends to contrast with a question design that would permit the witness to ‘speak for himself’.

A similar case from the news interview context is the following. In a panel discussion during an intermission in the Clinton impeachment hearings, PBS’s Margaret Warner (IR) begins a question that invites one of the commentators to comment critically on the presentational strategy of one of the House Prosecutors:

(4) [PBS: Impeachment Coverage 6 February 1999]

1 IR: I went back and looked. That first presentation by
 2 Rogan, > Congressman <Rogan took a half an hour
 3 where y’know he played the Sidney Blumenthal and he
 4 showed her taki:ng (.) the oath_ <I mean in retrospect
 5 -> wouldn’t- would you say that’s (.) might you sa:y, (.)
 6 or as Jim would [say <I(hh)’ll=
 7 (.): [hh .hh hhhh huh .hh .hh hh
 8 IR: =a(hh)sk in thuh form of uh que(h)stion:. Could that have
 9 be:en, (.) a waste o(h)f ti(hh)me?

Taking line 5 in conjunction with the eventual complement of the question at line 9, it is likely that Margaret Warner, having detailed Rogan's extensive use of video, was on her way to asking a question likely formatted as: "Wouldn't you say [that was a waste of time]". Catching herself after the initial production of the negative interrogative frame, she repairs the format successively to "Would you say that's" and the still weaker "Might you say", before temporarily abandoning her attempt to deliver the question. At this point, she comments on the nature of her difficulty—the excessively conducive design of her initial question frame, which she indexes with "or as Jim would say <I(hh)'ll a(hh)sk in thuh form of uh que(h)stion:". This comment, which attracts responsive laughter from all the other participants (data not shown), projects a further attempt which eventuates in the more satisfactory formulation: "Could that have be:en, (.) a waste o(h)f ti(hh)me?". Here, as in (3), the negative interrogative embodies a criticism of a third party.⁴

Recipients of negative interrogatives also respond to them in ways that deny their status as questions. In the following case from a Presidential press conference, President Clinton responded to such an interrogative from UPI's Helen Thomas as shown below:

(5) [Presidential Press Conference: 7 March 1997]

- 1 IR: W'l Mister President in your zeal (.) for funds during
 2 -> the last campaign .hh didn't you put the Vice President (.)
 3 an' Maggie and all the others in your (0.4) administration
 4 top side .hh in a very vulnerable position, hh
 5 (0.5)
 6 IE: -> I disagree with that.hh u- How are we vulnerable because ...

Here Clinton formulates his response as in 'disagreement' with Thomas's negative interrogative, thereby addressing it as a statement of opinion, rather than as a question in search of information, about Clinton's stance on the matter.

It is notable that, in all of these examples, negative interrogatives concerning matters about which there is shared knowledge are built to prefer 'yes' answers. In the last three cases, they are recruited (or incipiently so) to frame negative or critical

⁴ In a brief discussion, written for physicians and focused on the medical consultation, medical practitioner Buckman (1992: 49) offers a parallel (although invented) example:

- Patient: ...and my period's late so I think I'm pregnant.
 Doctor: Don't you think it would be pretty careless for you
 to get pregnant while you haven't got a house or a job?

Commenting on this example, Buckman comments that "Some sentences are phrased as questions but are not, in fact, questions at all. Biased questions are responses that we (occasionally) phrase in the form of a question, but which are statements about our assessment of the situation. They often reflect our own ambivalence—we know that we are under an obligation not to sit in judgment on the patient's situation but feel a strong desire to do so. In order to conform with what we see as professional behavior, we disguise the judgment as a question." (ibid.)

propositions while still inviting the recipient’s assent. In two of these cases, the addressee is invited to support a criticism of the conduct of a non-present third party (Clinton and Rogan, respectively), while in the last case, the addressee is the target of the criticism. This paper examines the use of negative interrogatives in the news media in this specific conjunction.

2.2. *Negative interrogatives: news interview cases*

Consider the following questions:

(6) [BBC TV Newsnight 14 October 1981]

1 IR: But won’t you have to consider threatening to vote
 2 against the government, = that’s surely what (.) what
 3 all the critics now have to face.

(7) [ATV Central Lobby, 1985: Benn]

1 IR: But shouldn’t you be preaching unity now instead of
 2 this class warfare which you: which you: talk about.

These questions are also designed to favor ‘yes’ answers. Thus the question in (6) invites the interviewee’s agreement that he will have to “consider threatening to vote against the government”, and is followed with an affirmatively polarized assertion (with “surely”) that reinforces the polarity of the interrogative. And in (7), the question, which is rendered transparently argumentative with the modal “should,” is designed for an affirmative response in which the interviewee acknowledges the criticism that he should be “preaching unity”.

Interviewees (IEs) recurrently treat questions formatted in this way as not ‘in search of information’ but rather ‘taking a position’. They do this by responding that they ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’ with the interviewer. Such a statement treats the interviewer as having gone beyond merely questioning, and as having made an assertion. The following are some examples.

In (8), the IE is the US Ambassador to South Africa. The interviewer’s negative interrogative invites a ‘yes’ response to the claim that the US policy towards the then-apartheid regime in South Africa has failed, a position which—as a government representative—the interviewee must necessarily reject:

(8) [PBS MacNeil-Lehrer: 22 July 1985]

1 IR: -> But isn’t this (.) d- declaration of thuh state of
 2 emergency:: (.) an admission that the eh South African:
 3 (.) gover’nment’s policies have not worked, an’ in fact that
 4 t he um- United States (0.2) administration’s policy of
 5 constructive engagement (.) has not worked.

6 IE: -> I do not agree with you .hhhh that the approach we 7
 7 have taken (.) toward South Africa is- a- is an
 8 incorrect approach.

Here the interviewer's question rests on shared knowledge of the behavior of the South African government, and plainly conveys a stance to the matter under discussion. The interviewee's rejecting response "I do not agree with you..." treats the interviewer's question as so decisively preferring a 'yes' answer that it took an (evaluative) position on the matter.

Similarly, in (9), the interviewer's question is based in a prior discussion of the behavior of certain Liberal Democrat MPs who had taken positions at variance with the party leadership:

(9) [BBC TV Newsnight: 1991]

1 IR: .hh Right. (.) Okay. S:o (0.2) you have loose cannons:
 2 (0.2) on your deck jus:t (.) as you rightly say a:l
 3 parties have. .hh But if we generously put this do:wn
 4 -> to (.) over exuberance. (0.2) tch .hh (.) doesn't that
 5 -> suggest that your party is still: (0.2) immatur:e. (0.3)
 6 irresponsible (.) undisciplin:ed h (0.2) unserious.
 7 IE: -> Well, (0.2) prove that:
 8 (0.6)
 9 IE: -> You made th'proposition, > (0.2) propose it to me. =

Here the interviewee—British Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown—responds to the preference carried by this negative interrogative by treating the interviewer as having made a critical assertion that he can be challenged to 'prove' (line 7) and, subsequently, by asserting that the interviewer made a 'proposition' (line 9).

And in (10), the interviewee—a senior British Labour Party figure—comments that the IR's prior turn was "good trade union bashing stuff" (arrow 2).

(10) [BBC TV Panorama 28 January 1981]

1 IR: 1-> ...Isn't the overall impa:ct of this whole procedure
 2 we've seen .hhh to: remind the country that the Labour
 3 Party is very largely in the grip of trade unions
 4 whose procedures are both .h ramshackle and
 5 undemocratic, .hh and to call what's just happened
 6 .hh an election of a deputy leader .h is actually
 7 a farce:. [And has just] demonstrated .hh to the country
 8 IE: [But But-]
 9 IR: at large how the [Labour Party's affairs are conducted]
 10 IE: 2-> [Yeah. tha- tha- tha- that's]
 11 2-> good trade union bashing stuff but it's absolutely

- 12 2-> irr[relevant ()]
 13 IR: 3-> [It's not trade union] bashing at all, = it's just
 14 describing the way things are.

Notably, the interviewer's response that, "it's just describing the way things are" (arrow 3), invokes independent (and common) knowledge of the facts to offer a rebuttal of the interviewee's claim that his highly conducive question has involved a departure from the 'neutralistic' stance required of interviewers, and is pushing a specific political agenda.

In (11), the interviewee—then Democratic Chairman of the US House Ways and Means Committee, Dan Rostenkowski—describes his position in relation to the Republican interviewer—political commentator George Will—as one of 'agreement'.

(11) [ABC This Week: December 1985]

- 1 IR: tch .hhh Mister chairman one way: thet- () smaller.
 2 (1.1) economic earners in this country avoid paying
 3 taxes is by getting paid increasingly in no:n ca:sh
 4 compensations. .hhh such ez fringe benefits. Such
 5 as: uh employer paid health insurance programs. You
 6 'ave refu::sed to tax: .hhhh this form of noncash
 7 compensation, but clearly it is compensation, it is
 8 -> income of some sort, .hhhh Isn't it unjust to allow:
 9 -> this to go untaxed.
 10 IE: .hhhhhhh That was the:: uh last item we negotiated
 11 -> eh- an:d uh () George uh (.) I agree. () uh that
 12 uh labor has been very forceful ...

While Rostenkowski's use of the term 'agree' here is a resource for displacing responsibility for the provision to the lobbying efforts of organized labor, his use of the term still treats the interviewer's question as having embodied a 'position' rather than simply posing a question.

Finally, in the following case, ABC's Sam Donaldson is questioning President George P. Bush's Budget Director, David Darman, about methods of handling the cost of the US savings and loan bail out of the late 1980s. The sequence begins with a negative interrogative which is initially brushed aside as a 'technical argument' (line 4). Donaldson then directly contradicts the interviewee, continuing his turn with a second negative interrogative. The association between the two actions—asserting a contradictory position, and following it with a highly conducive negative interrogative—are part of the same package of actions designed to challenge the interviewee.

(12) [ABC This Week October 1989: Darman]

- 1 IR: -> Isn't it a fact, Mr. Darman, that the taxpayers will
 2 pay more in interest than if they just paid it out of

- 3 general revenues?
 4 IE: No, not necessarily. That’s a technical argument—
 5 IR -> It’s not a—may I, sir? It’s not a technical argument.
 6 -> Isn’t it a fact?
 7 IE: No, it’s definitely not a fact. Because first of all,
 8 twenty billion of the fifty billion is being handled in
 9 -> just the way you want—through treasury financing. The
 10 remaining—

It is notable, in this context, that Darman’s response includes a reference to handling the problem “in just the way you want”—clearly indexing that, in his (Darman’s) view, Donaldson has taken a position.

These data suggest that ‘negative’ question formulation is a very strong way for an interviewer to project an expected answer—strong enough, when produced in association with question content that contests an interviewee’s position, to be treated as having made an assertion and taken a position. Interviewee responses to this question form, couched in terms of agreement or disagreement with the interviewer, are not the only type of reply to negative interrogatives, but they are recurrent enough to be very noticeable in the data we have available from both British and American sources.⁵ Just as significant is the fact that no other interrogative form in a news interview data base of some hundreds of interviews attracts this response.

It is also clear that interviewers orient to negative interrogatives as a very conducive form of questioning. This is manifested in the various forms of self repair that are often associated with this question type, and in the association of negative interrogatives with collateral assertions of various types.

In (13) for example, the interviewer is aiming to challenge the interviewee’s position on endorsing an arms reduction treaty with the then Soviet Union. Beginning with a negative interrogative, the interviewer abandons that question design in favor of stating a position and attributing it to conservative ‘critics’:

(13) [MacNeil/Lehrer 10 June 1985]

- 1 IR: How d’you sum up thuh me:ssage. that this decision is sending
 2 to thuh Soviets?
 3 IE: .hhh Well as I started- to say::it is a- one of: warning and
 4 opportunity. Thuh warning is (.) you’d better comply: to arms
 5 control:: agreements if arms control is going to have any chance
 6 of succeeding in the future. Unilateral compliance by thuh
 7 United States is just not in thuh works...
 8 ((Four lines omitted))

⁵ In general, responses of this type cluster in sequences where the interviewee is the target of the evaluative statements contained in reverse polarity negative interrogatives. It is under these circumstances, that interviewees break the institutionalized ‘question-answer’ frame of the interview to, if only briefly, cry ‘foul’ at the interviewer, but see (17) below for the negotiations involved.

9 IR: -> But isn't this- uh:: critics uh on thuh conservative side of
 10 thuh political argument have argued that this is: abiding by
 11 thuh treaty is: unilateral (.) observance. (.) uh:: or
 12 compliance. (.) by thuh United States.

Here a question, that would likely have run “But isn't this [unilateral observance by the United States]”, is revised to a more neutral utterance which puts that position to the interviewee with third party attribution (Clayman, 1992). Given the previous run of examples, it is clear that the interviewer here would prefer stating that position with attribution to framing it as a negative interrogative. In this way, he can avoid the risk that the interviewee would respond by ‘disagreeing’, and also avoid what might be an implication of that—the attribution of the ‘conservative’ position to the interviewer himself. Here then the shift from a negative question to a third party attributed statement is one that is designed to reduce the accountability of the interviewer's action as a statement on his own behalf, and any consequences that might flow from the interviewee's reaction to that. And in a further case from a panel interview, the interviewer begins with a question that overtly aligns with one of the interviewees, and against her interview opponent, with “Is: sh:'s right about that is'n- ” before revising the question to a less overtly aligned, but just as assertive, negative interrogative:

(14) [MacNeil/Lehrer 7/19/93: Gays in the Military:7]

1 IE1: .hhhh Well everyone s:ays right now: that unit cohesion (.)
 2 would be uh denigrated .hhh by: ah allowing openly gay and
 3 lesbian people to ser:ve. But in fa:ct every study that's
 4 been commissioned by thuh department of defense .h including
 5 thuh government accounting office's re:port .hh has indicated
 6 .h that it should be lifted, en that .h it is on:ly mere
 7 speculation on thuh part of people .h and we know, and thuh
 8 colonel does know this as well:, is that positive leadership
 9 .hh is- is the example of- by which (.) military people f:ollow.
 10 IR: -> Is: sh:'s right about that is'n- Can- Can't a military leader
 11 -> affect this s- very dramatic:al[ly]?
 12 IE2: [tch A military leader can
 13 affect a lo:t of things, ...((continues))

At line 10, the interviewer appears to be on his way to asking a tag question “sh:'s right about that is'n-” (itself revised from a more open interrogative form at the question's beginning with “Is:”). Subsequently, he moves—across an abandoned “Can” formulation—to the negative interrogative which specifies the previous “that” to the explicitly formulated “Can't a military leader affect this s- very dramatic:ally?”. It is notable that the interviewee takes issue with this proposition at lines 12 and 13, deploying a non-conforming response that, in preserving

the propositional content of the question as a frame for his response, exhibits ‘independence’ from its relevance and polarity (Raymond, 2000).⁶

In (15) below, the interviewer’s negative interrogative (arrow 2) is associated with another practice—invoking the audience’s interest and alignment (arrow 1)—which is strongly associated with aggressive questioning (Clayman, 2002). Here the question, addressed to a new CEO, concerns the disastrous management history of the Los Angeles’ Metropolitan Transit Authority:

(15) [CBS 60 Minutes: 17 December 1995]

- 1 IR: 1-> If I were (.) a citizen out here (0.2) and I heard your
 2 answer .hh I’d sa:y (0.2) to myself (0.2) we are spending
 3 more money (0.4) than has ever been spent on a subway
 4 (0.2) in the history (0.2) of subway construction (0.4) .hh
 5 and this guy is telling me he’s learning on the job (.)
 6 we’ve made mistakes, we are learning
 7 (0.2)
- 8 IR: 2-> [I mean- should not they expect that (.) when you pa:y
 9 IE: [Where we-
 10 IR: 2-> that much money that- that we shouldn’t be having all
 11 2-> these mistakes?
 13 IE: I agree: that (.) we should not be having those mistakes
 13 (0.4) absolutely agree (0.2) I wish these things did not
 14 happen to us (0.4) but we have got to (0.2) get better (.)
 15 and move o:n...

Finally, in the following sequence, the interviewer—faced with an interviewee’s interjective resistance to his question preface (arrow 1)—responds with a negative interrogative, one of the most coercive forms of question design available to him (arrow 2):

(16) [BBC TV: Newsnight October 1981]

- 1 IR: ...I couldn’t help notici:ng when uh .hhh Sir
 2 Geoffrey Howe was speaking this afternoon how
 3 while all your other ministerial colleagues were
 4 clapping uh .hh during his speech in between
 5 many of the things he was saying .hh you hardly
 6 clapped at all. = You hardly applauded at all.
 7 = Sitting as you were beside Mister Heath.

⁶ Olsher (1996) argues that this revision is motivated by the interviewer’s desire to retrieve specific details embedded in IR1’s prior turn for response by IE2. Here, then, the interviewer manages two tasks simultaneously—the retrieval of specific propositional content, and a ‘provocative’ alignment against the addressee. These objectives converge in the selection of a reverse polarized negative interrogative.

8 .hhh [Do you:]
 9 IE: 1-> [Come o]ff it.
 10 IR: 2-> d- (.) Well is it not true. =
 11 IE: = cu- Come off it. = () I clapped...((continues))

Across these data, negative interrogatives are used in sequences which have one or more of the following characteristics:

(1) The object of the negative interrogative is a matter of common knowledge between interviewer and interviewee, and most usually, has been the object of preceding talk. These negative interrogatives are all offered, as Bolinger puts it, “in plain view of the facts”.

(2) The negative interrogative involves propositions that evaluate the interviewee’s conduct, or that of superiors, allies or friends in critical, negative or problematic terms.

(3) This critical propositional content is embedded in the negative interrogative with a polarity that invites the interviewee to assent to the criticism, or to endorse criticisms of the conduct of allies, and

(4) The negative interrogative is argumentative or challenging in that it is designed to favor a response from the interviewee which contrasts with their earlier statements or actions, while not permitting them to do so without acknowledging inconsistency. These challenges thus ultimately invite rebuttal.

In short, an argumentative challenge to the interviewee is clearly apparent in most of these data. It is this element of incipient conflict which negative interrogatives appear designed to achieve while remaining, at least formally, within the remit of ‘neutralistic questioning’ which is mandated by journalistic ethics and other more legally institutionalized frameworks of conduct that surround broadcast journalism (Clayman and Heritage, 2002).

A return to a more extended version of the Donaldson–Darman interview sketched above, underscores the value of negative interrogatives for an argumentative or challenging interviewer. As already noted, at lines 5 and 6, Donaldson contradicts the interviewee, continuing his turn with a second negative interrogative, and Darman’s response, with its reference to handling the problem “in just the way you want”—indexes that Donaldson has taken a position:

(17) [ABC This Week October 1989: Darman]

1 IR: -> Isn’t it a fact, Mr. Darman, that the taxpayers will
 2 pay more in interest than if they just paid it out of
 3 general revenues?
 4 IE: No, not necessarily. That’s a technical argument—
 5 IR -> It’s not a— may I, sir? It’s not a technical argument.
 6 -> Isn’t it a fact?
 7 IE: No, it’s definitely not a fact. Because first of all,
 8 twenty billion of the fifty billion is being handled in
 9 -> just the way you want – through treasury financing. The

- 10 remaining–
 11 IR: -> I'm just asking you a question. I'm not expressing my
 12 -> personal views.
 13 IE: I understand.

Very notable in this context is Donaldson's riposte, at lines 11 and 12, that he was "just asking you a question" and not "expressing my personal views". And equally notable is Darman's accepting response to that: "I understand", at line 13. Given the discussion so far, it may be concluded that Donaldson's response was a little disingenuous, and that Darman's acceptance of his position colluded with him in playing the 'interview game'.

2.3. Negative interrogatives and tag questions: the weight of the challenge

In his account of negative interrogatives, Bolinger (1957) treats them as equivalent to assertions with negative tag questions, save for the fact that the propositional content of negative interrogatives is implicit, while in the tag question formatted utterances it is explicit. In what follows, I suggest that negative interrogatives deploy preference more strongly and are, in this sense, more conducive than their tag counterparts.

As an initial observation in this regard, it can be noted that the negative interrogative, the 'isn't it' or 'didn't you', occurs at the beginning of the turn constructional unit which follows. The relevance of this becomes obvious when we recognize that every one of the questions discussed earlier could have been formulated in a [statement]+[negative tag] format, e.g., for (6) "You'll have to consider threatening to vote against the government, won't you ...", or for (9) "That suggests that your party is still: (0.2) immatur:e. (0.3) irresponsible (.) undisciplin:ed h (0.2) unserious, doesn't it". Without belaboring the point, it is clear from the analysis of interviewee responses that this [statement] + [negative tag] form of question design is treated as less assertive and conducive than its negative interrogative counterpart. And indeed the [statement]+[negative tag] form is never responded to with statements of 'agreement' or 'disagreement' in the news interview context. Take, for example, the following heavily embattled interview sequence between left wing British miners' leader Arthur Scargill and veteran interviewer Robin Day:

(18) [BBC Radio World at One: 13 March, 1979]

- 1 IR: .hhh er What's the difference between your Marxism and Mister
 2 McGarhey's Communism.
 3 AS: er The difference is that it's the press that constantly call me
 4 a Ma:rxist when I do not, (.) and never have (.) er er given
 5 that description of myself.[.hh I-]
 6 IR: [But I]ve heard you- I've heard you'd
 7 be very happy to: to: er .hhhh er describe yourself as a Marxist.
 8 Could it be that with an election in the offing you're anxious to

- 9 play down that you're a Marx[ist.]
 10 AS: [er] Not at all Mister Da:y. = And
 11 I:'m (.) sorry to say I must disagree with you, = you have never
 12 heard me describe myself .hhh er as a Ma:rxist. = I have o:nly
 13 bee:n put in the position o- of answering that question when the
 14 specific point has been put to me: .hhh about whether or not er
 15 I would call myself a Marxist, .hhh or whether or not .h I
 16 subscribe to Marxist economic philosophy. =
 17 IR: = Do you ascri:be to Marxist economic philosophy. =
 18 AS: = I would say that there: er: the: (.) philosophy of Marx as far as
 19 the economics of Britain is concerned is one with which I find
 20 sympathy. = and would support it. = Yes.
 21 (.)
 22 IR: -> Well that makes you a Marxist doe[sn't it.]
 23 AS: [Not nece]ssarily makes me a
 24 Marxist in the descriptive sense,....

Notwithstanding the interviewer's efforts at entrapment with the pre-suppositionally loaded 'quandary question' at line 1 (Heritage, in press b), and the attempt to contradict the interviewee's rebuttal at lines 6–9, the interviewer's rather clumsy syllogistic attempt at line 22 to pin down his quarry as a Marxist with a [statement] + [negative tag] question is not responded to with a statement of 'agreement' or 'disagreement', and this is completely characteristic of how interviewees respond to this question design. They uniformly respond to the tag format as embodying a 'yes/no question' to be 'answered', and not as an assertion to be '(dis)agreed' with.

It is clear then that placing the negative interrogative frame at the beginning of a turn constructional unit makes it more 'assertive' and less 'questioning' than placing it at the conclusion. Why should this be so?

Two possibilities suggest themselves. The first relates to a general feature of turn design—the significance of turn beginnings for projecting what is to come (Schegloff, 1996). Since negative interrogatives are strongly designed for 'yes' answers, their placement in turn-initial position projects that preference across the entire trajectory to the turn constructional unit that follows. Here, the interviewer enlists the whole force of the preference for agreement on behalf of the question by its negative formulation. Whereas questions are usually designed so as to permit the recipient to express a position in alignment with the design of the question, here just the opposite is the case. The entire production of a hostile turn constructional unit in progress is understood over its course under the auspices that the speaker has designed it from the very outset for a 'yes' response. Insofar as the content of the unit is one that the interviewee would be inclined to reject, the negative interrogative challenges the interviewee to accept it, and projects that challenge across the turn constructional unit in its entirety.

By contrast, in the [statement] + [negative tag] format, the specific form of the interrogative is deferred, and the appearance of the specifically 'challenging' negative interrogative [which still might not be actualized—see (20), below]—does not appear

until the very last moment. The result of deferring the negative interrogative until the conclusion of the turn, rather than presenting it right at the start, is that the specifically hostile combination of [negative interrogative frame]+[hostile question content] is deferred until the end of the turn, rather than being present from the outset, and informing the turn's sense as an action over the entire course of its production.

A second and complementary line of reasoning also arises from the placement of the negative interrogative component in tags. Consider the pair of utterances:

(19a) “You’ll have to consider threatening to vote against the government, won’t you”.

and

(19b) “Won’t you have to consider threatening to vote against the government”.

In (19a) the question frame in tag position follows the hostile propositional content, and is the most recently produced interactional object ‘in play’. By the ‘preference for contiguity’ (Sacks, 1987 [1973]; Schegloff, 1996, in press), its form mandates the action which the interviewee should perform next—answering ‘yes’ or ‘no’. In (19b), by contrast, the same question frame precedes the hostile propositional content. It is the latter material which is most recently ‘in play’ and this, in addition to the other linguistic features of negative interrogatives, may license a respondent to address the hostile proposition in terms of (dis)agreement rather than in terms of its interrogative frame as a ‘question to be answered’.⁷

In the institutional context of the news interview, this issue takes on a particular significance. As a number of analysts have noted, news interview interaction properly consists of sequences of questions and answers (Clayman, 1988; Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1989; Heritage and Roth, 1995; Schegloff, 1988/1989). Because such sequences are normative for the news interview, it is common to find a subtle form of collaboration between interviewer and interviewee that permits both participants to remain within the framework of questioning and answering. For example, in the following sequence, the South African ambassador to the US, Herbert Beukus, is on the receiving end of a lengthy statement by the interviewer that is sharply critical of the then-apartheid regime of his government. Although, in contrast to most criticisms which interviewers attribute to third parties (Clayman, 1992), the interviewer, during the course of this turn, seems to deliver the criticism on his own behalf (with the “It seems to me” preface (line 8), repeated at line 10), it is also noticeable that the design of his final questioning component “Is that unfair? er” is one that permits the interviewee to agree with the proposition of unfairness, rather than disagree:

⁷ The same contrast in the relative assertiveness of negative interrogatives relative to tag questions is also to be found in assessments in ordinary conversation. While tag questions recurrently decline epistemic supremacy relative to an interlocutor, negative interrogatives assert that supremacy (Heritage and Raymond, 2002).

(20) [US ABC Nightline 22 July 1985: 4–5]

- 1 IR: As Peter Sharp said in that piece it is a lot easier
 2 to impose a state of emergency than it is to lift it.
 3 .hhh You still have the root cause when you lift it.
 4 And black leaders in that country have made it very
 5 clear .hhhh that this kind of situation there's no way
 6 of stopping this kind of situation unless there is an
 7 end to apartheid.
 8 It seems to me .hh that by doing this by eh imposing
 9 I guess this kind of repression you- .hh you really set
 10 up uh system where you can do nothing it seems to me
 11 1-> #.hh when you lift it# except to change the system
 12 that exists there (.) the basic system.
 13 2-> #.hhh# Is that unfair? er
 14 IE: Uh I- I would think it's unfair what is being said...

Examining the progress of the interviewer's turn in detail, we can see that, at each of the arrowed moments, the interviewer has come to what, in a conversational context, could be a possible turn transition point (Sacks et al., 1974)—a point at which a sentential or other kind of turn constructional unit in progress is complete. At each of these points, the interviewee could have responded by 'disagreeing' with interviewer. However, and notably, the interviewee does not do this. Indeed at the # marks arrowed 1 and 2 he takes an inbreath preparatory to speaking and then 'catches himself' and withholds his response until the interviewer delivers a question, at line 13. In this way, he collaborates with the institutional question-answer framework of the news interview, and he permits the interviewer to complete his turn with a question and thus to 'legitimate' his earlier statements as having been a 'question preface'. The interviewee is clearly a collaborator in the entire process by which this outcome is achieved: by withholding a response, he is a crucial contributor to the turn's co-construction as a question.

There is nothing special or unusual about this event. Interviewees recurrently orient to interviewer statements as 'on their way' to a question which conforms with the norms of news interviewer conduct, and withhold response until that comes about. Given that this is the case, it follows that interviewees recurrently orient to interviewer statements as prefatory to the legitimating 'question' of which the negative tag ('isn't it' or 'didn't you') is one kind of realization. The tag question is thus the point where the interviewer arrives at the 'safety' of having asked a question, and interviewees orient to that (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1989). Thus, not only might statements not culminate in a negative tag (as in 20), but they are also understood over their course as built to arrive at a more 'neutralistic' questioning element. In this context, for a variety of reasons, interviewees wait out explicit and hostile propositional content in the eventual expectation of receiving a yes/no tag question. By then, responding in the form of an 'answer' rather than a disagreement, interviewees avoid defecting from the terms of the 'interview game'. It seems probable that both

these considerations contribute independently and in concert to render the [statement] + [negative tag] format a comparatively innocuous question format, relative to its more assertive counterpart, the negative interrogative. It may be conjectured that the turn-initial and turn-final positions of the negative frame and the consequences of that for the real-time production of the two types of question and their sequential import sketched above, have rendered the negative interrogative the more ripe candidate for sedimentation into the question design that is conventionally treated as the more conducive of the two—another dimension of grammaticalized normativity.

3. Conclusion

Although the news interview is, as earlier suggested, a virtual laboratory of question design, this does not mean that the properties of negative interrogatives described above apply only in a news interview context. It is no accident that the tag question has been identified by some as a form of ‘powerless’ language, while the negative interrogative has not (Lakoff, 1975; O’Barr, 1982, for a different view see Coates, 1986). Here, I suspect, is a case where research from a relatively specialized ‘institutional’ environment will have a payoff for the study of talk in ordinary social contexts (Heritage and Raymond, 2002). That this should be the case is not surprising. Practices of talk-in-interaction, though sometimes given particular inflections and twists in institutional contexts (Drew and Heritage, 1992) have important underlying continuities across settings, including most prominently, their ‘home environment’ of ordinary conversation. In the negative interrogative, we find a case study and a context where grammar and interaction, political communication, and conversational interaction intersect one another to bear out this fundamental continuity.

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