

Why No(t)?

This note presents a simple, novel diagnostic for determining the phrase structural status of negative markers cross-linguistically, a topic of enduring interest (for recent approaches and references see Haegeman; Zanuttini; Giannakidou, *Landscape and Polarity*). If the sentential negative marker in a given language is phrasal (an XP, generally adverbial), it will occur in the collocation *why not?*; if it is a head (an X⁰, generally clitic-like), it will not. In the latter languages, the word for ‘no’ can sometimes be used, itself (presumably) a phrasal negative adverb. (*A fortiori*, languages with possibly word-internal morphological markers for sentential negation, such as Turkish, will not allow these markers in the collocation.)

The first group of languages, those with XP negative markers, is given in 1:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|--------------|----------|--------|------------|-------------------|
| (1) | a. English | why | not? | * why | no? ¹ |
| | b. German | warum | nicht? | * warum | nein? |
| | c. Dutch | waarom | niet? | * waarom | nee? |
| | d. Danish | hvorfor | ikke? | * hvorfor | nej? |
| | e. Icelandic | hverfor | ekki? | * hvarfor | nej? |
| | f. French | pourquoi | pas? | * pourquoi | non? ² |
| | g. Tsez | shida | anu? | * shida | ey? |

The second class of languages, those with X⁰ negative markers, is given in 2:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|------------|--------------|---------|--------|------|
| (2) | a. Greek | * giati | dhen? | giati | oxi? |
| | b. Italian | * perchè | non? | perchè | no? |
| | c. Bezhta | * su-d | -esh | su-d | gä'ä |
| | d. Russian | * pochemune? | pochemu | njet? | |
| | | why | not | why | no |

This test cannot be applied universally, however: in many languages, the words for ‘not’ and ‘no’ are homophonous, so the relevant data are unrevealing. Languages of this type include Spanish *¿porqué no?*, Catalan *per què no?*, Romanian *de ce nu?*, Bulgarian *zashto ne?*, Czech *proč ne?*, Polish *dłaczego nie?*, Hebrew *lama lo?*, and Hungarian *miért nem?* Other languages may lack a stand-alone word for ‘no’; if such a language also has head/clitic negation, we expect that no equivalent to ‘why not?’ will be possible, an expectation borne out by Irish and Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese.

This correlation, though somewhat less perfect, is also often found with the negative element used in constituent negation, in *whether TP or not* constructions,

in negative stripping,³ and in negative elliptical protases of conditionals (the latter two illustrated here):

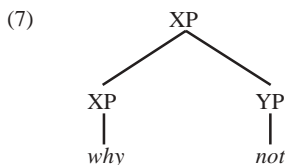
- (3) a. Eng: Anna left, but not Ben. * Anna left, but no Ben.
 b. Ger: Anna ging, aber nicht Ben. * Anna ging, aber nein Ben.
 c. Dut: Anna ging, maar niet Ben. * Anna ging, maar nee Ben.
 d. Icel: Anna gikk, en ekki Ben. * Anna gikk en nej Ben.
 d. Fr: Anna est partie, mais pas Ben. * Anna est partie, mais non Ben.

- (4) a. Gk: * I Anna efige, alla dhen o Ben. I Anna efige, alla oxi o Ben.
 b. Ital: * Anna è partita, ma Ben non. Anna è partita, ma Ben no.
 c. Russ: * Anna poshla, no ne Ben. Anna poshla, no Ben njet.
Anna went but not Ben not Anna went but no Ben no

- (5) a. Eng: If he comes, it'll be fine; if {not/*no}, we have a problem.
 b. Ger: Wenn er kommt, wird's gut sein; wenn {nicht/* nein},
 c. Dut: Als hij komt, zal 't goed zijn; zo⁴ {niet/* nee},
if he comes will it good be if not no
 dann haben wir ein Problem.
 dan hebben wij een probleem.
 then have we a problem

- (6) a. Gk: An erthi, tha'ne kala; an {* dhen/ oxi}, tha exoume provlimata.
 b. Ital: Se arriva, bene; se {* non/ no⁵}, avremo problemi.
if comes will.be good if not no we.will.have problems

This distribution of negative markers is expected under the standard assumption that *why* is a phrasal adverb (an XP), and if only XPs can adjoin to XPs (the directionality of adjunction perhaps varying across languages, a point I will abstract away from here):



Negative heads like Greek *dhen*, on the other hand, cannot adjoin to such XPs. The negative adverbial *oxi* ‘no’, however, can. (Note that this difference between phrasal negation and head negation becomes somewhat mysterious under the “minimal-maximal” conception of nonbranching constituents as suggested for clitics by Noam Chomsky [249].) The use of the negative marker for sentential negation seems to be the default option across languages; only if phrase-structural incompatibility rules out the use of this marker can the negative adverb ‘no’ be used instead.

Notes

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¹ This string is irrelevantly possible on a quotational use of ‘no’ as in example i (cf. ‘Why Frank?’ etc.):

- (i) A: The answer is no.
B: Why ‘no’? Why not ‘yes’?

The data in the text hold for the usual use of *why not* in response to a negative assertion, as in example ii:

- (ii) A: Anna is not leaving.
B: Why not? [i.e., Why isn’t Anna leaving?]

It appears that this derives from an application of sluicing to a negative sentence, though details remain unclear; this identification is made, for example, in Horn (164–65).

² French also has the preverbal X⁰ negative marker *ne*, which, as expected, does not occur in the collocation: **pourquoi ne?*

³ This correlation is not perfect, as indicated. In French, for example, *non* ‘no’ can be used in negative stripping if it follows the contrasted element and is preceded by a pause:

- (i) Anna a mangé, mais Ben, non.
Anna has eaten but Ben no

In Italian, we also find *non* as a marker of constituent negation (CN); therefore, strings like ii, with pre-XP constituent negation, are possible as well:

- (ii) Anna ha magiato, ma non Ben.
Anna has eaten but CN Ben

⁴ The usual Dutch *als* ‘if’ is not possible here (**als niet, . . .*), being replaced in this context by the adverbial *zo* ‘thus(ly), so, in which case.’

⁵ Italian also has a lexical item that can be used in such cases, namely *senno* (roughly, ‘otherwise, alternatively’), which is considered somewhat more colloquial than *se no* and which is more like an adverbial in its syntax; cf. French *sinon*, Spanish *sino*.

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