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 X^0, 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 née?
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 X^0 negative markers, is given in 2:

(2) a. Greek * giati dhen? giati oxi?
b. Italian * perché non? perché no?
c. Bezhta * su-d -esh su-d gii‘a

d. Russian * pochemune? pochemu njet?

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 dlaczego 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, 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.
   d. Fr: Anna est partie, mais pas Ben. * Anna est partie, mais non Ben.

   b. Ital: * Anna è partita, ma Ben non. Anna è partita, ma Ben no.

Anna went but not Ben not Anna went but no Ben no

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):

(7)

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 irrelevently 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 X^0 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.

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 mangiato, ma non 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 sennò (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.

Works Cited
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