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Movin Arbejdspapirer / Movin Working Papers

2005:3

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Requests and offers: some uses of negative interrogatives.

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Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Negative interrogatives, offers, requests, conduiciveness.

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Abstract

This paper examines negative interrogatives as they are produced in the context of Danish home help visits. It is demonstrated that negative interrogatives are typically not produced or treated as questions designed for a 'yes'/'no' answer. Rather, negative interrogatives are recurrently deployed as a vehicle for making requests and offers, hence making relevant a complying or accepting response, respectively. In making requests and offers, participants shape their social environment in certain ways and each of these activities makes different roles relevant for the participants. It is argued that through making a request, a senior citizen highlights the institutional setting of the home help visits, emphasising her own role as a care recipient. Through making an offer, in contrast, the senior citizen may take on the role of hostess, hence treating the home help provider as a guest.

Requests and offers: some uses of negative interrogatives.

1 Introduction

Negative interrogatives appear to be exceptional grammatical structures in that they can be biased towards either a positive or a negative answer as the confirming, agreeing response. The question ‘Isn’t it raining?’, for instance, can be used not just to ask whether it is not raining, but also to indicate that the speaker guesses that it is (Sadock and Zwicky, 1985; Pope, 1976). Consequently, many linguistic studies have focussed on this ambiguity, and attempted to account for the fact that negative interrogatives can receive a positive ‘yes’ answer rather than the (theoretically) expected alternative, a negative ‘no’ answer (see for instance Büring and Gunlogsson, 2000; Ladd 1981).

That negative interrogatives can be biased towards an affirmative ‘yes’ is often ascribed to the concept of conduciveness, that is, “that the speaker is predisposed to the kind of answer he has wanted or expected” (Quirk et al., 1985: 808). According to Büring and Gunlogsson (2000) (see also Ladd, 1981; Bolinger, 1957) a speaker’s predisposition towards a positive response can be determined through contextual evidence which establishes the truth value of the proposition being questioned. The negative interrogative ‘Isn’t it raining?’ for instance, could be used in a setting where one person has invited another for a walk. Through the window, both can see that it is pouring down outside. Thus, both the questioner and the recipient have access to the contextual evidence needed to answer the question, an answer which in this case would be a positive and confirming ‘yes, (it is raining)’. In short then, a negative interrogative

can be biased towards a positive response because of the context in which it is produced.

In studies such as the ones mentioned above, the contextual evidence that determines a speaker's predisposition towards a positive response is constructed by the researcher, as are the negative interrogatives themselves. As pointed out by Koshik (2002) this means that such studies "cannot give us any information about the extent to which such utterances are actually said, if ever, or how they are used." (Koshik, 2002: 1854). We may, as language users, intuitively agree that the negative interrogative 'Isn't it raining' is biased towards a 'yes' response in the context described above. However, as the context is constructed specifically to prove this point, we have no way of telling whether such contexts actually exist in real life.

A further drawback of using invented examples is that such studies fail to consider the activity accomplished through a negative interrogative. This is problematic because what a negative interrogative is used for in interaction may affect what kind of response it receives. This is demonstrated by Heritage (2002) in a paper on the use of negative interrogatives in naturally occurring talk. Focussing on English news interviews, Heritage shows how interviewers use negative interrogatives to frame critical propositions, typically involving the interviewee/recipient, as in the following example.

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

(From Heritage, 2002, pp 1432, example (5))

1 IR: W'l Mister President in your zea:l (.) 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..

In this example, the interviewer (IR) in lines 2-4 produces a negative interrogative.

Heritage argues that the interviewer through this makes a proposition about the conduct of the interviewee (that he did put others in a vulnerable position), treating this conduct as shared knowledge. Thus, the negative interrogative is biased towards a 'yes' answer, one that assents to the proposition. Because the proposition is also a critical evaluation of the interviewee's conduct, the interviewer in effect challenges the interviewee to assent to what he has just evaluated as bad conduct. Consequently, recipients of such argumentative challenges treat the negative interrogative as an assertion rather than as a question in search of information. In the example above, for instance, the interviewee formulates his response as being in disagreement with the proposition, thereby addressing the negative interrogative as a statement of opinion and denying its status as a question. Thus, it is the social activity (a challenge) implemented through the production of a negative interrogative that determines what type of response the negative interrogative is designed for.

Heritage does not claim that all negative interrogatives are treated as assertions, regardless of whether they are produced in the context of news interviews or elsewhere. He does, however, raise several issues of relevance to further studies of the conduciveness of negative interrogatives. First, that negative interrogatives are interpreted as activities; in this case, argumentative challenges. Second, that it is this activity that affects the conduciveness of the negative interrogative. Third, that because

of the activity being implemented through the production of a negative interrogative, these do not necessarily receive responses of either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Rather, they receive responses connected to another activity; in the case above, that of disagreement and rebuttal.

The present paper also considers negative interrogatives as they are deployed in naturally-occurring talk, while focussing on the social action that they accomplish. Specifically, it investigates how Danish negative interrogatives are deployed in home helpers’ visits to the elderly. In this setting, negative interrogatives can be used for a variety of actions, including the seeking of information and the actions of confirming, asserting, proposing, reproaching and challenging. Overwhelmingly however, negative interrogatives are used for the accomplishment of two activities, those of requesting and offering. Both of these activities concern the transfer of an object or service from one person to another. But whereas requesting is done by the potential recipient of an object or service, offering is done by the person who has a service or object to give. In both cases the negative interrogative structure can be shown to be biased towards a positive response, in the case of requesting, compliance, in the case of offering, acceptance.

The study is organised as follows. First, I briefly describe the data that form the basis for this study: Danish home help visits. Next, I describe how negative interrogatives can be used for social activities such as requesting and offering. For each of these activities, I demonstrate how the conduciveness of a negative interrogative depends both on the sequential context and the setting in which it is produced. I also show how the specific social activity that is implemented through the production of a negative interrogative affects what kind of answer it is designed for – and ultimately receives. Based on the finding that negative interrogatives can accomplish requesting

and offering, I conclude by discussing the effect that the use of these negative interrogatives have on the interaction and the relationship between the participants.

2 Data

The negative interrogatives focussed on in this study are drawn from video recordings of Danish home help visits. The situations recorded were not arranged for the purpose of the project, and all participants had consented to being recorded. The data was collected in accordance with general ethical guidelines. Hence, personal names and references to places have been changed to pseudonyms in the transcript.

The home help service is a government program that offers assistance to elderly or disabled persons who are unable to manage on their own. One or more home help providers visit the house of the care recipient to assist her/him with personal hygiene, cleaning and cooking. The home help data that forms the basis of this study consists of thirteen visits. All in all, six home help providers and four care recipients participate in nine and a half hours of recordings. The care recipients are men and women in their early eighties, while the home help providers are all women, of various ages.

In Danish, as in many other Germanic languages, negative interrogatives are constructed through subject-verb inversion. The following examples of negative interrogatives are all taken from naturally-occurring talk, and are presented with an English word-by-word translation to give an idea of the structure of negative interrogatives in Danish.

(a) Har vi ikke mere af det saltvand? Have we not more of that saltwater?

(b) Vil du ikke passe hende lørdag? Will you not watch her Saturday?

As is attested by example (a), subject-verb inversion does not require the presence of a modal or auxiliary verb in Danish, as is the case in English. When a modal or auxiliary verb is present, the main verb is positioned after the negative marker, as attested by example (b).

The study is based on a collection of seventy-eight negative interrogatives. These were typically produced by the senior citizen and accomplished either a request or an offer. Though the home helpers do, on occasion, produce both offers and requests these were always directed at somebody else than the senior citizen and has not been considered here.

3 Negative interrogatives as requests

The first negative interrogatives presented are those which implement requests. Senior citizens who receive home help are often physically disabled in some way or another. This means that they are unable to manage everyday tasks such as cooking, cleaning and personal hygiene. Thus, the home help context is ripe with situations in which the senior citizen may need to request the home help to perform some such task. As with many other activities, there are various ways in which requests can be formulated (see Lindström, 2005; Heinemann, forth.). In the Danish home help, one recurrent format for requesting is the negative interrogative. In fragment (2) the senior citizen (P) uses a negative interrogative to request that the home help (HH) give her a pillow. The request is indicated by arrows in the transcript.

(2) Extra pillow

- 1 □ P: Ve' du ikk' gi' mig en pude til i ryggen,=jeg:
Will you not give me a pillow more in back-the=I:
Won't you give me one more pillow in the back,=I
- 2 □ <721929>(0.2)<722153> har ikk' fået den(t)=som jeg
plejer

(0.2) have not gotten that=that I use
(0.2) haven't got the one=that I usually
{HH turns towards P, starts walking
- 3 □ å' få når jeg spiser,=
to get when I eat,=
get when I eat,=
towards P
- 4 HH1: Krhmm
- 5 <725366>(1.4)<726793>
- 6 P: (fra skammelen)
(from stool-the)
(from the stool)
{HH reaches P}
- 7 <727647>(1.2)

{HH lifts the pillow}<728876>
- 8 P: Jerh tak.

Yeah thanks.

Yes please.

{HH starts moving to the other side of P

9 (.)

10 HH1: Uuhu::hphuhhh Jeg har sove' alt for meget,
Uuhu::hphuhhh I have slept all too much,
Uuhu::hphuhhh I've slept way too much,

11 P: Har du det?
Have you that?
Have you?

☒<733222>

12 HH1: Det' mærk'li' man å' ka' det,
It's strange one also can that,
It's strange that that's possible,
{HH now to the right of P lifts pillow

☒<735054>

13 P: M' det ka' man godt.
But that can one well.
But it is.

14 ☒<736091>(0.7)
{and places it behind P☒<736802>

15 HH1: Så[,]
So[,]
There you go,

16 P: [T]ak.

[T]hanks .

17 ♂<737322> (0.4) ♂<737745>

18 HH1: Vær'sgo',
 Beu-so-good,
 You're welcome,

Here, the senior citizen is sitting in her living room, eating her cooked lunch. The home help is in the kitchen getting coffee and dessert ready. For native speakers of Danish, the negative interrogative produced by the senior citizen in line 1 unproblematically constitutes a request, rather than, for instance, a question concerning the home help's willingness to get a pillow. There is no need, however, to base such an analysis on native speaker intuition, as the participants themselves display their understanding of how the negative interrogative is to be understood.

In the fragment at hand, there are various cues that show that both the senior citizen and the home help orient to this negative interrogative as a request. First, the senior citizen, in combination with her negative interrogative, in lines 2-3 orients to the reasonability of her request (Lindström, 2005). This is done by pointing out that having a pillow in her back is routine, and hence something that she is entitled to ask for, is, in fact, something that she shouldn't have needed to ask for.² In turn, the home help, through her non-vocal and vocal activities, demonstrates that she has understood the negative interrogative as a request. Though she is in the process of opening a box of biscuits in the kitchen, around the (0.2) second gap in line 2 she turns towards the senior citizen, and starts walking towards her. Thus, at a point at which the senior citizen's turn in line 1 is recognisable as a request, the home help initiates a movement which makes it possible for her to comply with the request. At the point at which the home help reaches

the senior citizen (in line 6), the senior citizen instructs her as to where to find the pillow, thus displaying that she has understood the home help's movements as a move towards compliance. When the home help lifts the specified pillow from the stool, this activity is confirmed as correct through the senior citizen's *Jerh tak*, "Yes please" (in line 8). The home help then moves around the senior citizen to place the pillow, complying with the request. Throughout this non-vocal activity, the home help and the senior citizen discuss the home help's sleeping habits (in lines 10-13). Exactly at the point at which the home help places the pillow in an adequate position behind the senior citizen, the home help vocally marks this through the production of *Så*, 'There you go' (in line 15). In doing so, the home help proposes that the activity is complete, again displaying that her understanding of the senior citizen's negative interrogative was that it was a request, a request that she has now complied with. In turn, the senior citizen ratifies this interpretation and collaborates in the closure of the activity, through an expression of gratitude.³ Thus, through studying the participants' vocal and non-vocal activities, we find compelling evidence that the negative interrogative was produced, intended and understood as a request for assistance.⁴

As noted by Heinemann (forth.), the negative interrogative format is, because of its potential conduciveness, a particular apt way in which to accomplish a request. By framing her request as a negative interrogative, the senior citizen takes the position that the home help will (and ought to) provide an extra pillow. Thus, the negative interrogative is biased towards a 'yes'-response, in that a 'yes' would confirm that the senior citizen was right in assuming that the home help is willing to provide an extra pillow. In this way the senior citizen displays a very strong position on being entitled to make the request – and have the requested task performed.

As an activity, however, the request in line 1 is designed to be responded to in terms of compliance/rejection, with a preference for compliance. It is this responding activity that shows the recipient to be aligned with the project undertaken by the speaker doing the request. And it is, in fact, the requesting activity which is oriented to by the recipient, so that the request is responded to with compliance rather than a ‘yes’ (or ‘no’) answer. This is parallel to the findings made by Heritage (2002) for argumentative challenges accomplished through negative interrogatives in news interviews. Challenging and requesting are not the same type of activities, and hence do not get responded to in the same way. Whereas in Heritage’s case the negative interrogatives were responded to in terms of agreement/disagreement, the negative interrogatives that accomplish requests are responded to in terms of compliance/rejection.

It is the activity accomplished through a negative interrogative, then, that determines what kind of response such a structure is designed for and whether it is biased towards a certain response or not. Crucially, what a negative interrogative may be designed for need not be either a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’, as is evident both from Heritage’s study and from fragment (2). In fact, negative interrogatives that are produced and treated as requests are only very rarely responded to simply with ‘yes’ (or ‘no’). When they are, this is because the request cannot be complied with immediately. This is the case in fragment (3). Here, the home help responds with a ‘yes’ to the senior citizen’s request, specifically to display that she does intend to comply with the request, but that this activity is being deferred due to another, ongoing activity.

(3) Turn on the light

☒ <185562> 1 ☐ P: Ka' du ikk' tænde loftlyset?

Can you not light ceiling-light-the?

Can't you turn on the light in the ceiling?

{HH is cleaning P's bottom with a disposable cloth

2 HH2: J↓oh,

Y↓es,

{HH continues cleaning P's bottom

3 ☐<187883 (2.2) ☐<190087>

4 HH2: Det ved du det ska' hun ha' a' vide ALti',

That know you that shall she have to know ALways,

You know she has to be told that always,

{ HH moves towards bin bag where wash cloths are
discarded, discards the wash cloth}

5 P: °Jerh/Mm°

°Yeah/Mm°

{HH moves towards the light switch

6 ☐<192634> (1.2)

{HH turns on light☐<193855>

☐<201069>

The senior citizen is lying in her bed while the home help washes her lower regions after having removed her diaper. At the point at which the senior citizen makes the request, the home help is already engaged in another activity, that of cleaning the senior citizen's bottom. Rather than comply with the request immediately, the home help finishes the activity engaged in, then deposits the dirty, disposable cloth in a bin bag (around line 4), before turning to the light switch and turning the light on. As her non-vocal activities do not display to the senior citizen that she intends to comply with the request, she instead

produces a 'yes' that signals that she has heard and understood the request, and that she intends to deal with it as soon as possible.

In fragment (3), it is 'yes', rather than 'no' that projects compliance with the request accomplished through a negative interrogative. That is, through her 'yes' response the home help confirms that she can turn on the light. Hence, the negative interrogative in this case is treated as being biased towards a 'yes' response. It is important to note, however, that this conduciveness is related directly to the fact that the negative interrogative, as in fragment (2), implements - and is treated as - a request. In contrast, negative interrogatives that are instead intended or treated as a question to be confirmed/disconfirmed are not conducive. Instead, such negative interrogatives are biased towards a 'no' response as the confirming answer. This is the case in the following fragment.

(4) Water glass

1 P: Så ka' vi skifte mig bagefter ().
Then can we change me afterwards ().
Then we can change my diaper afterwards.

2 HH1: Mja:=jerh.
Mye:s=yeah.

3 P: Du fik ikk' den med.
You got not that with.
You didn't take that with you.

4 HH1: Jerh.
Yeah.

☒ <446089>

5 □ P: Ve' du ikk' ha' den med ud?
 Will you not have that with out?
 Don't you want it with you?

☒ <447355>

6 HH1: Hva'ffor en?=nøj jeg ska' ha' den fyldt op,
 What-for one?=no I shall have it filled up,
 Which one?=no I need to fill it up,

Here, the senior citizen is sitting in her chair and the home help has just served her lunch. An empty coffee cup and an empty water glass are both placed on the table in front of the senior citizen. Around lines 1-2 the home help picks up the coffee cup, but not the glass, and walks towards the kitchen. In line 3, the senior citizen points out that the home help neglected to take the glass. The home helps response in line 4 is of opposite polarity to that of the senior citizen's turn and hence unfitted (Heinemann, 2005). This suggest either that the home help has failed to hear what the senior citizen said, or has chosen to ignore it. In reaction top this, the senior citizen produces what may be seen as another attempt to get the home help to take the glass out. This is done through her negative interrogative in line 5 *Ve' du ikk' ha' den med ud* 'Don't you want it with you?'.

In this context, the potential ambiguity of negative interrogatives becomes evident. On one level, the negative interrogative accomplishes a request in the same manner as was the case in fragments (2) and (3), in that the senior citizen through this makes the positive assertion that the home help will (and ought to) take the glass with her. At another level, however, the negative interrogative is biased towards a negative response, one that confirms the negative assumption displayed by the senior citizen, that

the home help does not want to take the glass with her. Crucially, it is the latter aspect of the negative interrogative that is oriented to by the home help in her response. After a repair (in line 6), she confirms that she does not want to take the glass, by producing the negative response token *næj* 'no'. Subsequent to this she explains that she will use the jug (from the fridge) to fill up the glass instead. In short, the home help treats the negative interrogative as a genuine question, biased towards a 'no' response, rather than as a request biased towards a 'yes' response (or compliance).

The case-by-case analysis of the fragments in this section has established that negative interrogatives can be used for the activity of requesting. Through their contributions to the interaction, participants display whether a negative interrogative was intended, understood, and treated as a request. If a negative interrogative is treated by the participants as a request, then it is conducive, or biased towards a 'yes' response, though actual compliance with the request is most often accomplished non-vocally. However, because of the potential ambiguity of the negative interrogative, participants can also choose to treat these as genuine questions. In such cases, the negative interrogative is biased towards a confirming 'no' response. The conduciveness of a negative interrogative is thus dependent on what activity it accomplishes. This, in turn, is something to be negotiated by the participants.

In studies of language-in-use, requesting has been shown to be a dispreferred action which speakers will attempt to avoid (Levinson, 1983; Lindström, 2005; Schegloff, 1979). As noted by Lindström (2005) however, a senior citizen's ability to formulate requests is "an important resource for shaping her immediate social environment." (Lindström, 2005, pp 00) That is, requests are one way in which the senior citizen can get assistance with basic tasks from the home help. As a care recipient depending on this assistance, the senior citizen is entitled to make (certain) requests. In

turn, the home help in the role of care provider is expected to comply with these requests. Through producing a request, the senior citizen highlights the institutional relationship that exists in the home help visits, underscoring her own role as a care recipient and the home help's role as a care provider (Lindström and Bagerius, 2002). The institutional and asymmetric relationship between the participants in the home help visits may facilitate the senior citizen's making requests (see Wootton, 1997 for another context in which the relationship of participants facilitates requests). In the home help data, requests initiated by the senior citizen are recurring phenomena, and more than a quarter of all negative interrogatives are used for this activity.

In its most basic form, a request is about getting a service, object, or piece of information transferred successfully from one person to another. The same can be said of a very different activity, that of offering. Whereas requesting is done by the potential recipient, offers are done by the one that has a service, object, or piece of information to give (Schegloff, 1995). Requests and offers thus work as alternative ways of getting something transferred from one person to another. Interestingly, this parallelism in activity is reflected in the way in which offers and requests are structured, organised, and negotiated in interaction. In the following section, I look at how negative interrogatives can accomplish offers. As with requests, participants respond in terms of the activity being accomplished through the negative interrogative. I demonstrate how participants through their contributions to the interaction, display to each other whether a negative interrogative was intended, understood, and treated as an offer. Finally, I discuss how offers – as requests – help constitute social relationships. However, whereas requests highlight the institutional context of the home help visits, offers will be shown to downplay this context.

4 Negative interrogatives as offers

The second type of negative interrogatives presented is those which implement offers. As in the case of requests, the nature of the home help visits appears to facilitate this type of activity. In contrast to many other institutional interactions of a care-taking nature, the home help visits take place in the care recipient's home (see Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Leppänen, 1998 for other such institutional interactions). Within her/his home-environment the senior citizen can invoke her role as a host, thus downplaying the institutional character of the visit. In doing so, the senior citizen also invokes the role of the home help as a guest in his/her home. One way of doing this is through making an offer. In the following fragment, the senior citizen takes on the role of hostess by offering the home help something to drink.

(5) Elderflower cordial

- 1 HH: Nå: Lena nu' jeg ve' å' være færdig,
 PRT Lena now'm I with and be finished,
 Right Lena now I'm about done,
- 2 ☒<773303> (0.4) ☒<773665>
- 3 P: Ska' du ha' no'e' å' drikke?
 Shall you have something to drink?
 Do you want something to drink?
- 4 HH: Ja: tak jeg ve' gerne ha' et glas vand
 Ye:s thanks I will rather have a glass water
 Ye:s please I'd like a glass of water

5 hvis det æ',
 if it is,
 if that's okay,

6 ☒<776663>(0.3)☒<776925>

7 ☐ P: Ve' du itt' ha' det de:r hylde_ç
 Will you not have that the:re elderflower-tea_ç
 Don't you want that elderflower tea_ç

8 ☒<778775>(0.8)☒<779580>

9 ☐ P: hylde_ç
 elderflower-cordial_ç

10 HH: (> -)Har du stadigvæk mer'
 (> -) Have you still more
 (> -) *Have you still got more*

11 a det da?<
 of that PRT?<
 of that then?<

12 P: Ja:*:[: det' ()]
 Ye:*:[:s that's ()]

13 HH: [Nåhm' så ve' jeg godt sm]age a' det,
 [PRT-but then will I well ta]ste of that,
 Oh but then I'd like to taste some of that,

This fragment is taken from the end of a visit. The home help has just finished cleaning the floors, and in line 1 she vocalises this completion. The senior citizen first produces an unspecified offer (something to drink), made through a positive interrogative. Upon acceptance of this, she then makes a second offer (in lines 7-9) that specifies what type of drink could be offered, some elderflower cordial. The offer is done through a negative interrogative. Again, the home help accepts this offer.

In the home help data it is typically the senior citizen who makes offers, just as it is typically her/him who makes requests. What is being offered is always an object, typically some edible goods, as for instance the elderflower cordial in fragment (5). This is in contrast to the requests in the previous sections that all involved the transfer of a service. Through making an offer of an edible object, the senior citizen downplays the institutional context by proposing a different relationship between her/himself and the home help; that of hostess and guest. Making an offer and thereby proposing a redefinition of the established relationship is sensitive to the acceptance of the recipient, particularly in an institutional context such as the home help visits. What is being offered may, for instance, not be desired, or needed by the recipient. Or, the home help may not be able to accept the offer because of her work schedule. In addition, the home help may prefer to not engage in an activity that downplays the institutional relationship between herself and the senior citizen.

As with requests, framing an offer as a negative interrogative is a particular strong way of making an offer. Because of its potential conduciveness, the senior citizen through the use of a negative interrogative asserts that what she is offering is something that the home help needs or wants. Consequently, senior citizens can often be seen to orient to a potential rejection of their offer in the way they format this activity. This is

particularly evident in the following fragment, where what is being offered is minimised as much as possible. Again, a negative interrogative is used for making the offer.

(6) Rye bread

15 □ P: Ve' i hva'¿ ve' i ikk' godt ha' et hajlt
know you(p) what¿ will you(p) not well have a half
You know what¿ won't you please have half a slice

16 □ stykke råvbrø'?=for jæ' ska'¿=.hhh [Vi ska'
piece ryebread?=because I shall¿=.hhh [We shall
of rye bread==because I'm having some¿ We'll

17 HH: [Jo så
[Yes then
Yes then

18 P: li' hå't-]
just have-a-]
just have a-

19 HH: ta'r vi li' e]t halvt stykke [å' ,]
take we just]a half piece [also,]
we'll just take half a slice as well,

Here, the home help (and the researcher) have already agreed to have coffee before starting work.⁵ The home help and the senior citizen have both turned to the kitchen work bench, getting coffee cups and coffee ready, when the senior citizen produces a negative interrogative (in lines 15-16), enquiring whether the home help (and the researcher) would like a light lunch. The offered goods, 'half a slice of rye bread' is as minimal as possible. Through the incremental phrase 'because I'm having some', the

senior citizen furthermore downplays her potential role as a host, by indicating that she is only offering a light lunch because she is having some herself anyway. In addition, the use of the particle *godt*, ‘please’ suggests that the proposed transfer is something wanted by the senior citizen rather than the home help, and hence, that the home help would be doing the senior citizen a favour in accepting the offer. In turn, the home help, after accepting the offer with a ‘yes’, also orients to these aspects of the offer. First, she repeats the minimising ‘half a slice’. In combination with the stressed particle *lī*, ‘just’, this indicates that the proposed transfer will be as minimal as possible for both parties. Second, through the use of *så*, ‘then’ and *å*, ‘as well’, the home help suggests that she accepts the offer specifically because the senior citizen is having a light lunch anyway.

In the previous section, it was demonstrated that when negative interrogatives are used for making requests, they are responded to in terms of that activity. In a parallel fashion, negative interrogatives used for making offers are responded to in terms of acceptance/rejection. The negative interrogatives produced in fragments (5) and (6) are conducive exactly because they are being used for making an offer, just as is the case for negative interrogatives used for making requests. In contrast to requests, however, acceptance of offers in the home help data typically take the form of a ‘yes’ response, as in fragments (5) and (6). This may have something to do with what is being offered, namely edible goods. In both of the fragments above, the object being offered is not physically available to the recipient at the point at which it is offered. Hence, the offer can not be accepted through a non-vocal activity such as grabbing the offered object.

That there is this strong correlation between acceptance of an offer and a ‘yes’ response does not, however, mean that a ‘yes’ response is always an acceptance. In fact, a ‘yes’ response can be used specifically for not treating the negative interrogative as an offer (compare to fragment xx, where a potential request was not treated as such). This

9 HH1: A' det det?
 Is it that?
Is it?

10 ☒<983860>(0.3)☒<984154>

11 P: Hva'rǿ
 Whatǿ

12 ☒<984607>(0.8)☒<985444>

13 P: ()

14 HH1: Jeg spørg om det' Bering?
 I ask if it's Bering?

15 P: Nejh.
 Noh.

16 ☒<988025>(2.7)☒<990749>

17 □ P: Ska' du ikk' ha' kaffe?
 Shall you not have coffee?
Shan't you have coffee?

18 HH1: JOH.=
YES.=

19 P: Jahmen det' i[kk']
 Yesbut it's n[ot]

20 K: [Ne[j. Ne] tak. hhehNej tak(hh).]
 [No[. No thanks. hhehNo than(hh)ks.]

21 HH1: [TIne? hheh Nh(hh) .]
 [TIne? hheh PRT(hh) .]
Tine? hheh Oh .

22 K: hheh D(hh)et' f(hh)int. Ellers t[ak.]
 hheh T(hh)at's f(hh)ine. Otherwise t[hanks.]
That's okay. But thanks.

The senior citizen is sitting in the living room; the home help and the researcher (K) are in the kitchen. Prior to this, the senior citizen has asked the home help to find a telephone number for her. She has, however, been unable to recall whose telephone number she wanted. The home help is now leafing through the senior citizen's address book to see if she can guess whose number the senior citizen wants. In line 1 the home help suggests that they are looking for the number of a florist, called 'Bering'. In overlap with this, the senior citizen produces a negative interrogative, redone after a short pause in line 3.

The negative interrogative enquires as to whether the recipient is having coffee and could be interpreted as an offer, because of the potential positive assertion 'you shall have coffee'. The home help, however, does not treat the negative interrogative as an offer, but as a genuine question to be confirmed or disconfirmed. In line 5, rather than responding in terms of acceptance/rejection, she disconfirms the potential negative assertion 'you shall not have coffee'. The disconfirmation is further strengthened by adding that she has already taken some. This latter statement suggests that 'coffee' is not understood as an object that can or need be offered by the senior citizen. Thus, the home

help appears to be resisting being assigned the role of being a guest in the senior citizen's home.

Having responded to the senior citizen's negative interrogative, the home help returns to the issue of whom the senior citizen wants to call, treating the sequence initiated by the negative interrogative as being complete. However, in line 17 the senior citizen once again produces the negative interrogative, suggesting that she is yet to receive an adequate response to this turn. The home help interprets the senior citizen's pursuit of a response as having to do with problems of hearing and reproduces her disconfirming 'yes' very loudly and with emphasis. Again, this response treats the negative interrogative as a genuine question biased towards a negative response, rather than as an offer designed for acceptance.

The home help was, however, not the intended recipient of the negative interrogative, which was in fact intended as an offer, not as a question. This becomes apparent in line 19, where the senior citizen initiates repair of the sequence by stating that her negative interrogative was not directed at the home help. As the only other person present in the house is the researcher doing the filming, the senior citizen must have been directing the negative interrogative at her. Upon realisation of this, the researcher engages in the interaction by immediately responding to the negative interrogative (in line 20). In contrast to the home help, the researcher does treat the negative interrogative as an offer, and displays this by responding with a rejection ('no') as well as an appreciation ('thanks') of the offer.

Fragment (7) exemplifies how a 'yes' response, by treating a negative interrogative as a genuine question, can serve to avoid addressing that it is being used for making an offer. In addition, the different ways in which the home help and the researcher respond to the negative interrogative demonstrates that the type of activity a

negative interrogative accomplishes is determined by the negotiation and interpretation of the participants within the interaction. Negative interrogatives used for making offers thus nicely parallel with those used for making requests. Offers – as requests – are responded to in terms of the activity accomplished, and it is this that determines what kind of response the negative interrogative is designed for – and receives.

As with requests, the activity of offering seems to be facilitated in the context of the home help visits. More than a quarter of all negative interrogatives were used for offers in the home help. The large number of offers in the home help data might – at least partly - be accounted for by the fact that offers – as requests - serve a particular purpose in this context. But whereas a senior citizen's request serves to highlight the institutional context of the home help visits, offers downplay this by casting the participants in other roles than that of care giver and care recipient. Through making an offer, the senior citizen instead proposes her/himself as a host. In turn, by accepting the offer, the home help accepts her role as a guest. In the home help visits, offers thus work as a way of neutralising the potential asymmetry that exists between the participants.

5 Conclusions

Two types of activities frequently implemented through the production of a negative interrogative have been described: requests and offers. Negative interrogatives implementing offers and requests are conducive, biased towards a particular response because of the social activity they accomplish. Requests are designed for compliance, offers for acceptance. Whether a negative interrogative is interpreted as a request or an offer depends on the sequential position in which it is produced, as well as on the participants' interpretation. If a negative interrogative is not interpreted as an offer or a

request, then it is not conducive. Instead, it is treated as a genuine question biased towards a 'no' response confirms the negative assertion potentially carried by the negative interrogative. Clearly, considering negative interrogatives as they are used in interaction contributes to our understanding of why such constructions can be biased either towards a 'yes' or a 'no' response.

The interactional setting of the home help visits may facilitate activities such as requesting and offering. Because of the institutional relationship between the home help and the senior citizen, the senior citizen is entitled to make requests for assistance. Through making such requests, the institutional character of the home help visit is highlighted and the home help's role as a care provider is underscored. Offers, on the other hand, invoke a different set of roles, taking the focus away from the institution. Thus, by making offers the senior citizen may cast her/himself in the role of being the host, and the home help in that of being a guest.

As demonstrated by Heritage (2002), negative interrogatives can, in news interviews, be used as strong positive assertions that challenge the interviewee. In the interactionally very different setting of home help visits, negative interrogatives are instead used typically for requesting and offering. This indicates that what activity a negative interrogative is employed for may depend on the interactional context in which it occurs.

Although several aspects of negative interrogatives remain for future analysis – e.g., what kind of activities negative interrogatives may deploy in different types of interactions, and whether these activities makes the negative interrogative conducive or not – this study has shown that the conduciveness of negative interrogatives is interactionally organised, thus emphasizing the relevance of combining the analysis of syntax with that of interaction.

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Appendix a: Transcription conventions

The symbols used in the transcriptions are based on the system developed by Gail Jefferson for conversation analytic research, with a few additions.

1. Temporal and sequential relationships

[overlap onset

] overlap ends

= latched speech

(0.4) silences, approximately represented in tenths of a second

(.) micro-pause, less than 2/10 of a second

2. Aspects of speech delivery

. The punctuation marks are used to indicate intonation. The period indicates a falling, final intonation contour. Similarly, a question

? mark indicates strongly rising intonation,

, a comma rising intonation and

the inverted question mark indicates a rise stronger than

¿ the comma but weaker than the question mark

:: Colons are used to indicate the prolongation or stretching of the sound just preceding. The more colons, the longer the stretching

- A hyphen after a word or part of the word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption

nej Underlining is used to indicate emphatic stress

NEj	Upper case indicates loud talk or pitch reset
°nej°	The degree sign indicates that the talk is markedly softer and lower than the talk around it
>nej<	Indicates that the talk is markedly faster than the surrounding talk.
*	Indicates 'creaky' voice
↑↓	The up and down arrows mark sharp rises or falls in pitch.
hh	Audible aspiration is shown by the letter 'h'
.hh	Indicates an audible inhalation
.nej	Indicates that the word is said with an inbreath
(h)	h in brackets within a word indicates aspiration, often laughter

3. Other markings

((cough))	Double parentheses are used to mark the transcribers description of events, rather than real representations
(bodel)	Words within single parentheses indicate that this is the likely hearing of that word
()	Empty parentheses indicate that something is being said, but that no hearing can be achieved
{ }	Curly brackets indicate where in the talk a described non-vocal activity is initiated or completed

¹ I would like to thank Leelo Keevallik, Pirjo Lindfors, Anna Lindström, Chiara Monzoni, and Lina Nyroos for comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. The study is one of several investigations within the project Language and social action: A comparative study of affiliation and disaffiliation across national communities and institutional contexts (financed by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research and the Swedish Research Council).

² In requests in the home help visits, there is often an indication that the senior citizen has requested something that the home help ought to have done without being asked. In this fragment this is indicated by the senior citizen's reference to what is routine. See also fragment (3), where the home help jokingly reproaches herself for having to be asked to do something.

³ I am indebted to Anna Lindström for suggesting that the home help's vocal orientation to the activity as completed may work as a first pair part, a proposal, which makes relevant a second pair part, acceptance or rejection of the proposal.

⁴ See Lindström (2005), for parallel Swedish examples of how home help and senior citizen display to one another that an individual utterance (though not a negative interrogative) was intended and understood as a request.

⁵ I use the term 'agree' rather than 'accept' here, because the coffee is not 'offered' in the same way as the light lunch. Thus, having coffee is suggested by the senior citizen through the statement 'we'll just have a cup of coffee you know; We'll have a proper cup of coffee'. The various ways in which offers can be made has not been investigated in Danish, but see Curl (in press) on various formats through which offers can be done in English.