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Why don't you try taking it again?

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62. Why don't you try taking it again?

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This contribution examines a specific construction, the *why don't you* construction, which is used as a vehicle for offering suggestions and giving advice (Couper-Kuhlen 2014). The *why don't you* format serves as a vehicle for the social action of giving advice, arising in a range of environments, which have in common the speaker's perception of a **problem to be solved**, to which it proposes a solution.

The environments in which the *why don't you* format occurs can be understood as a continuum ranging from more to less explicit. In our collection, the most explicit recruiting environments are those in which a problem has been explicitly formulated:

(1) Stay down

```
1 Emm: =[y-u-you don't ] [know ho:w foggy it
2      is uptow:n=
3 Lot:                               [°° ( )°°
4 Emm: =and ho:w smoggy you could die:::.
5 Lot: → oh: I nu- why don't you stay do:wn.
6 Emm: oh I'd lo:ve to. but I du- I'll see:,
```

Emma has been complaining about how bad the weather is 'uptown' (lines 1 and 3), where she currently lives. Lottie takes this as a problem formulation; in her *why don't you* turn she offers the advice that Emma 'stay down' at the beach, where the weather is better.

A less explicit recruiting environment can be seen in (2), where Mary Lou is running a possibility past her friend Claire for showing some Avon cosmetics at a women's club meeting.

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(2) **Showing**

1 Mar: well I wondered if it would be: uh--
2 uh u-not kosher: to uh mention this a:t
3 the regular general meeting and have me
4 ex::plain to them what it is about,
5 (0.4)
6 Mar: and e-ask them if they'd like a
showing.
7 (0.5)
8 Cla: → **well WHY don't you.**
9 (.)

Here Claire takes Mary Lou's formulation of mentioning a showing at the meeting, with a *wonder if* format, as a problem calling for her input. With her *why don't you* format, she advises Mary Lou to do what she is already considering.

Why, then, should the *why don't you* format be used in such environments as (1)-(3)? What are the specific grammatical affordances of this format that makes it so apt for the offering of suggestions and advice in these 'problem-raising' environments? We propose that the answer lies in its interrogativity, the question word *why*, and its negativity. To see this, consider the phone call between Geri and her friend Shirley in Extract (3). Shirley has failed an entrance examination for law school.

(3) **Taking it again-1**

17 Ger: → .hhhh Shi:rley, I mean why don't
you try taking it agai[:n.
18 [.hhh-
19 Shi: .hhhhh 'cause I really don't know if
20 I could put myself through it all
21 over again.

Geri could have used an affirmative interrogative format such as *can you try taking it again?*, but the *why don't you*

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construction ‘suggests that the recipient would have to have particular ... reasons *not* to comply’ (Drew 2013). Shirley’s response addresses both aspects of Geri’s negative interrogative format: Shirley’s *because* is a direct response to the *why*-interrogative, and her reluctance to put herself *through it all over again* provides the ‘particular’ motivation which Drew suggests Geri’s negative formulation has sought, and which had not been forthcoming earlier.

By studying the interaction between the recruiting environments in which the *why don't you* format occurs and the affordances of its grammar, we can refine an understanding of the ways in which everyday encounters allow participants to ‘come to perceive another’s need and offer or volunteer assistance’ (Kendrick & Drew 2016).

Notes

1. The research for this contribution has been carried out together with Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen.

References

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