

Omission of a Question Mark in Such Expressions As *Why don't you* or *Why not*

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Abstract Sentences that begin with *Why don't you* (*I, we*) or *Why not* are primarily interrogatives, and they normally take question marks. A large number of these instances are used with question marks, but some of them are not. The instances with question marks can imply suggestions, offers or requests as well as doubt or interrogative meanings. The instances without question marks can also imply suggestions, offers or requests. The expressions similar to *Why don't you* or *why not* include *How (What) about, Can I, Can (Could) you, Can't (Couldn't) you, Will (Would) you, Won't (Wouldn't) you* and *Will (Would) ... please*. The objective of this article is to explore how and why these expressions are sometimes used without question marks. The instances were largely taken from the corpora in the BNC and Wordbanks. Although both of these expressions used with or without question marks can show suggestions, offers or requests, when they are not used with question marks, they sound less polite than when they are used with them.

Health Science Research 21(2): 65-71, 2009

Key Words : Why don't you, Omission of Question Marks, Suggestions, Offers, Requests

Received 20 February 2009

Accepted 23 March 2009

1. Introduction

Sentences beginning with *Why don't you* (*I, we*) are interrogatives, they usually take question marks, and they usually imply interrogative meanings. But at times these sentences do not take question marks, although the instances with question marks outnumber those without them. In both of these instances used with or without question marks, they can imply suggestions, offers or requests. The expressions like these include, besides *Why don't you* (*I, we*), *Why not*, *How (What) about, Can I, Can (Could) you, Can't (Couldn't) you, Will (Would) you, Won't (Wouldn't) you* and *Will (Would) ... please*. Based on a large number of instances, this article will discuss how and why these expressions that do not take question marks are used and how different they are from those that take them. Studies of this kind have already been made in part, but they are too fragmentary for us to comprehensively see the whole picture.

2. The Omission of a Question Mark

2.1 Why don't you (I, we), Why not

2.1.1 Why don't you

Quirk et al. (1985:821) say that when *Why don't you* is used, the speaker is frequently critical and irritated because the person spoken to has not done or is not doing what is required to do. This would be typically seen in (1a-c):

- (1) a. And then she was angry again. "You're wrong. You're quite wrong. Now why don't you just forget the whole thing?"

(BNC Online, hereafter BNC)

- b. He told her, "Why don't you just fuck off, sweetie." Burton rose in anger, but Liz Taylor simply smiled at Marvin and said, "I see you haven't changed a bit, Lee" and walked off.

(BNC)

- c. At the question session afterwards, one disgruntled UFO watcher summed up the audience's feelings: "If you want to talk about psychology, why don't you bugger off to a psychology conference."

(BNC)

Sentences that begin with *Why don't you* are primarily interrogatives. It means that these sentences nor-

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mally take question marks:

- (2) “Wouldn’t you like to stroke that dog?” The man shook his head. “Why? Why don’t you want to stroke it?” another person asked. (BNC)
- (2) still retains doubt, or the inquiry force. However, in (3a-c), although these sentences still take the question marks, the inquiry force has been lost:
- (3) a. “Why don’t you stay at home and help Aunt Bedelia with the dandelion?” he suggested. (BNC)
- b. “Why don’t you take me back to my house and I’ll try some other way?” I suggest. (BNC)
- c. “Why don’t you drink to it?”
Jane did... (BNC)
- (3a-c) show suggestions or offers. When the sentences beginning with *Why don’t you* show these meanings, the question mark is sometimes omitted:

- (4) a. Why don’t you do this first and then let’s talk about the other one.
(Wordbanks Online, hereafter WBO)
- b. Why don’t you have a shower and wash away the dreams of the night. (BNC)
- c. Why don’t you ask Mrs Ellworthy to let you make some of that rice porridge of yours. (BNC)
- d. Look, why don’t you hop on the tube and come on in and have a drink. (BNC)

The omission of a question mark in sentences beginning with *Why don’t you* will make these sentences blunt, or less polite. In (5), the existence of *and* makes this sentence closer to a directive, and as a result, it is almost equivalent to *Come up here for a week or two, and I’ll show you how to ...*:

- (5) Why don’t you come up here for a week or two and I’ll show you how to knit a string bag to put hubby in, then you can hang him up with the onions. (BNC)

(6) shows that sentences beginning with *Why don’t you* can also be used to suggest a cynical sneer:

- (6) “Why don’t you pray for a miracle, Father,” Myles said sardonically. (BNC)

2.1.2 Why don’t I

Questions beginning with *Why don’t I* can be used as ordinary interrogatives:

- (7) a. “Mummy, why don’t I look like Paula?” she had asked. (BNC)
- b. Why don’t I feel like that? (BNC)
- c. “Why don’t I feel reassured?” “Because you worry too much.” (WBO)

Why don’t I can be used to make suggestions or offers:

- (8) a. “Why don’t I show you the place where Mountbatten was killed?” Father Devine suggested. (BNC)

b. Why don’t I take you out for a nice dinner this evening? (BNC)

c. Now why don’t I pour us a drink? (BNC)

When *Why don’t I* is used like this, it has already lost the meaning of doubt or the inquiry force. Therefore at times it is used without question marks:

- (9) a. Why don’t I give you a hand. (WBO)

b. Why don’t I tie it to one of these. (WBO)

c. She says why don’t I go out there on a visit. (BNC)

d. Sherbert’s promoter said he thought I had talent so why don’t I go down south and make a go of it. (WBO)

However, (9a-d), which do not take question marks, may be less polite than (8a-c), which take them.

2.1.3 Why don’t we

When *Why don’t we* has the inquiry force, it is used as an ordinary question:

- (10) a. The question is not what can we do about the greenhouse effect, but why don’t we do anything? (BNC)

b. You may ask me then: “Why don’t we do just that?” (BNC)

Yet, when *Why don’t we* is used to make suggestions or offers, the inquiry force disappears. But these sentences often retain question marks:

- (11) a. “And why don’t we have a bottle champagne sent up?” Surkov suggested. (BNC)

b. “I’ll tell you what, why don’t we have supper at Brown’s?” she suggested, rising to her feet. (BNC)

c. Why don’t we take a breather? (BNC)

This use can also be found without question marks:

- (12) a. Why don’t we go for a walk in the garden. (BNC)

b. Look, why don’t we go for a drink tonight and then we’ll talk. (BNC)

c. Why don’t we let her go if that’s what she wants. (BNC)

d. Why don’t we pull the curtains. (BNC)

But the sentences with question marks will be more polite than those without them.

2.1.4 Why not

The corpora in the BNC and WBO show that, of the two types *Why don’t you* and *Why not*, both of which can mean suggestions, when looked at merely in terms of frequency with which they are used, *Why not* is

more often used: it is used approximately twice as frequently as *Why don't you*. *Why not* is more often used probably because it is less direct, and more polite than *Why don't you*, which also suggests the speaker's irritability. Huddleston and Pullum (2002:874) and Quirk et al. (1985:821) say that *Why not* can be used only to make suggestions and that it cannot be used to ask for reasons. But there are examples in which *Why not* can be used to ask for reasons:

- (13) a. Why not stay with what we normally hear and see and feel? Because it's not grand enough? (BNC)
 b. "Why not think and act as Great Britain Incorporate?" he asked. (BNC)
 c. But, asks Bayle, why not go further still? (BNC)

Why not used with question marks can be used to make suggestions or offers,;

- (14) a. To finish, another suggestion. Why not build a dayglo-colour band into each handle and blade? (BNC)
 b. Why not drop in and have a drink? (BNC)
 c. It is such a nice day, why not go for a swim? (BNC)

The examples in (14a-c) do not have the meaning of doubt, which leads to the cases in which question marks are omitted:

- (15) a. So why not put pen to paper and win a wardrobe of fashions. (BNC)
 b. Why not share our many resources for constructive mission. (BNC)
 c. Why not go for the whole thing, he says. (WBO)
 d. It can be hard to figure out what your life is going to be about anyway, so why not just take off and let something happen. (WBO)

These sentences without question marks may sound brusque and blunt, and it is almost a directive.

2.2 How about, What about

2.2.1 How about

How about is often used as an ordinary interrogative:

- (16) a. "How about you?" I asked. (BNC)
 b. How about Charlie, does he know about the Manson Family? (BNC)

When *How about* is used like this, a conjunction and a whole sentence can come after *How about*:

- (17) a. How about if we had no lots of ten? (BNC)
 b. How about when someone says, "Let's go for a ride?" in an American accent? (WBO)

How about can also be used to make suggestions or offers, and it is a milder form of *Why don't you*. In these cases, *how about* has already lost the inquiry force but a question mark is still retained.

How about can be followed by a noun phrase (18a), a verb phrase (18b) or a whole sentence (18c), all of which imply suggestions or offers:

- (18) a. Now how about something to eat? (BNC)
 b. How about reading poetry to each other? (BNC)
 c. How about we cut the sides and front short, and leave the back long? (BNC)
 d. "How about we do it?" she suggested. (BNC)

When *How about* means suggestions or offers, it can be followed by a conjunction or a whole sentence:

- (19) How about if we just shot him? (WBO)

There are also instances without question marks in the same meanings. In (20a-f), (20a,b) are followed by a noun phrase, (20c,d) a verb phrase and (20e,f) a whole sentence:

- (20) a. How about a cup of tea. (BNC)
 b. Alternatively, how about a leisurely lunch next to the lake while watching the fishermen mending their nets. (BNC)
 c. How about trying something on these lines. (BNC)
 d. "How about sittin' in a tree waitin' for badgers," suggested George. (BNC)
 e. How about we go up to your room. (BNC)
 f. Hey, how about we run a mini Super League up here and form an eight-team competition. (WBO)

In this use, even a conjunction comes after *How about*:

- (21) a. How about if we shared it out between a tenth of us. (WBO)
 b. How about if I bury it three inches down. (WBO)

However, the instances with question marks may sound more polite.

2.2.2 What about

Like *How about*, *What about* is often used as a mere interrogative:

- (22) a. What about the weather conditions? (BNC)
 b. What about health conditions? (WBO)

When used like this, sometimes a whole sentence or a conjunction comes after *What about*.

- (23) a. Then they were asked, "Well what about in November if the choice is Bush, Clinton, Perot?" (WBO)

b. What about when this is over? (WBO)

The BNC and WBO show that, if we look at *What about* and *How about* merely in terms of frequency, *What about* is used more than twice as often as *How about*. But when it comes to suggestions or offers, *What about* seems to be less frequently used. But the examples of *What about* used in this way can be found. (24a-d) are examples of *What about* used to make suggestions or offers:

- (24) a. I say, old chap, what about a drink? (WBO)
 b. What about coming home with me for a drink? (WBO)
 c. What about giving me your telephone number? (WBO)
 d. What about getting married and having children? (BNC)

When *What about* shows suggestions or offers, *What about* can sometimes be used without question marks:

- (25) a. Well what about just talking about school again. (WBO)
 b. What about us two castaways joining forces. (WBO)
 c. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought. (WBO)
 d. What about planning permission or restriction on use. (WBO)

What about can even be followed by a conjunction:

- (26) a. What about if we put in on line. (WBO)
 b. What about if she sit here everybody can see her. (WBO)

2.3 Can you, Could you

2.3.1 Can you

When *Can you* is used to make offers or requests, it is often used with question marks:

- (27) a. Can you join us? (BNC)
 b. Can you suggest anything? (BNC)
 c. Can you help us? (BNC)
 d. Can you open the windows in your office? (BNC)

Adding *please* would make these expressions more polite:

- (28) Can you please return this to stock for use in completing the next order? (BNC)

Can you without question marks can also be used to make offers or requests:

- (29) a. Can you move round this side a bit. (WBO)
 b. "Can you lend me some money dad," he says sheepishly. (WBO)
 c. So can you bring them to my party. (WBO)

d. Can you get rid of it. (BNC)

But the examples with question marks would be more polite than those without them.

At times *please* is added to make the suggestions or offers more polite:

- (30) a. Can you please help me to find some water-proof seat covers. (BNC)
 b. Can you please arrange to settle the attached invoice. (BNC)

However, (30a,b) would be less polite than (28), which has a question mark.

2.3.2 Could you

Could you is more polite than *Can you*. It is used to make requests. Sentences that begin with *Could you* often end with question marks:

- (31) a. Could you do us a real favour? (BNC)
 b. Could you give me a hand? (BNC)
 c. Could you please at least tell them it's quite urgent? (BNC)

Could you can also be used without question marks:

- (32) a. Now could you put yourself in the place of those drivers. (WBO)
 b. Could you explain exactly what's happening there. (WBO)
 c. Could you possibly advise me about the sickness "Attention Deficit Disorder" affecting adults. (WBO)
 d. Please could you have more on Dalmations in your magazine. (BNC)

Sentences with question marks may be less direct, or less brusque than those without them. But judging from (33a,b), the difference between the two may be subtle. Probably (33a) and (33b) were written by the same person:

- (33) a. Could you please tell me how to get to Leicester Square? please, I asked wide-eyed, eager and hopeful. (BNC)
 b. Could you please tell me the way to Leicester Square, I said, speaking softly, in my best voice and with my toothiest smile. (BNC)

2.4 Can't you, Couldn't you

2.4.1 Can't you

Can't you may be more polite than *Can you*. Sentences that begin with *Can't you* mean requests. These sentences are often used with question marks:

- (34) a. "Can't you leave us alone now?" he pleaded. (BNC)
 b. Can't you mind your own business? (BNC)
 c. Can't you leave me alone for God's sake? (BNC)

These sentences are sometimes used without question marks. But this time the requests will become less polite:

- (35) a. Can't you just relax for a minute, Alison. (BNC)
 b. Can't you tell by my arms. (BNC)
 c. Can't you tell me why you just came out of a Yorkshire pub. (BNC)
 d. Can't you get him to leave you alone. (BNC)

2.4.2 Couldn't you

Sentences beginning with *Couldn't you* express requests. *Couldn't you* is more polite than *Can't you* or *Could you*. *Couldn't you* can be often followed by a question mark:

- (36) a. Couldn't you wait? (WBO)
 b. Couldn't you postpone it until cocktail time this evening? (BNC)
 c. Couldn't you just lend me some Thai money? (BNC)

Couldn't you is sometimes used without question marks, but this would be less polite than those with question marks:

- (37) a. Couldn't you just buy some nectarines or something. (WBO)
 b. Couldn't you hire a good lawyer and make a fight of it. (BNC)
 c. Couldn't you go up in the other corner. (BNC)
 d. Couldn't you have put the blue nearer the middle cos I'm getting annoyed. (BNC)

2.5 Will you, Would you

2.5.1 Will you

When *Will you* is used to make requests or offers, it is often followed by a question mark:

- (38) a. Will you excuse us? (WBO)
 b. Will you help me? (WBO)
 c. Will you say cheese? (WBO)

It can be used without a question mark:

- (39) a. "Will you excuse me, Maggie," he said. (WBO)
 b. Miss, will you put your arm under one other, an' I'll do this side. (WBO)
 c. Will you please calm Mummy and Daddy down. (WBO)
 d. Will you get her ready, Daisy. (WBO)

But this time the request may be brusque or blunt. In the following, (40a) may be more polite, and it appears more earnest than (40b):

- (40) a. Darling, will you marry me? (WBO)

- b. Caroline, will you marry me. (WBO)

2.5.2 Would you

Would you is a more polite form of *will you*. It can be used to make suggestions, offers or requests:

- (41) a. Would you like some tea? (BNC)
 b. Would you like to come round for a cup of tea? (BNC)
 c. Would you explain that? (WBO)

Would you can be used without a question mark. But (42a-d) sound more brusque than (41a-c):

- (42) a. Would you please indicate whether you're voting for or against or whether you are abstaining. (BNC)
 b. "Would you please cross to the other side of the street," he said. (WBO)
 c. Ray, would you care to start the meeting. (BNC)
 d. Would you like to say who you represent please. (BNC)

According to *The Right Words at the Right Time* (1985:503), when *Would you* is used to make requests, it is used in various degrees. It says that (43a) shows a tentative request for permission, (43b) a rather more confident request, (43c) a piece of advice rather than a request, and (43d) a sarcastic sneer:

- (43) a. Would you mind very much if I closed the window?
 b. Would you open the door for me (?)
 c. Would everyone wishing to visit the Doge's palace please assemble on the right.
 d. Would you mind not spitting cake in my face when you talk.

2.6 Won't you, Wouldn't you

2.6.1 Won't you

Won't you can be used to make suggestions, offers or requests. It would be more polite than *Will you*. It is often used with question marks:

- (44) a. Won't you drink? (BNC)
 b. Won't you sit down, Miss Swift? (BNC)
 c. Won't you come in for a minute? (BNC)

Won't you can also be used without question marks. However, judging from the examples in the BNC and WBO, *Won't you* does not seem to be so often used without question marks: it seems to be used more frequently with them. But the instances of *Won't you* with question marks can be found:

- (45) a. Won't you make a cup of tea or something like that. (WBO)
 b. Won't you pray for me. (WBO)
 c. Darling, won't you ease my worried mind.

- (WBO)
- d. Right now, won't you please write a small check to show our men and women in uniform that you still care. (WBO)

2.6.2 Wouldn't you

Sentences beginning with *Wouldn't you* mean suggestions, offers or requests. *Wouldn't you* may be more polite than *Would you*. It often occurs with question marks:

- (46) a. Wouldn't you like a hot cup of coffee? (BNC)
 b. Wouldn't you like something to eat? (BNC)
 c. Wouldn't you wait? (BNC)

Wouldn't you can also be used without question marks. The examples of *Wouldn't you* that do not take question marks can seldom be found in the corpora, which probably means that *Wouldn't you* is used more often with question marks. (47a,b) are the only examples without question marks that were found in both BNC and WBO:

- (47) a. Wouldn't you stay at least five miles away from the place if you were wandering out there. (BNC)
 b. I mean wouldn't you be absolutely pig sick of them by the first of December never mind Christmas. (BNC)

Overall, the examples of *Wouldn't you* with or without question marks are relatively few. That may be because this expression is too polite.

2.7 Will (Would) ... please

2.7.1 Will ... please

Will ... please expresses requests. In this structure the third person becomes the subject. This type of sentences can be used with question marks:

- (48) a. Will Mrs Peterson please go to the second floor? (WBO)
 b. Will one of you please explain what's been going on behind my back? (BNC)
 c. Will the real Norman Anderson please stand up? (BNC)

The examples that have no question marks can also be found. Judging from a large number of examples that have no question marks, this expression without a question mark seems to be preferred today. But this time the requests may sound brusque:

- (49) a. Will Mr Green please come to the reception desk. (BNC)
 b. If Kinnock wins today will the last person to

- leave Britain turn out the lights. (WBO)
 c. If someone's stolen my pen will they please return it. (BNC)
 d. Will someone please tell me. (WBO)

2.7.2 Would ... please

Would ... please means requests, and the third person becomes the subject. This can be used with question marks. This type of examples can be found in large numbers both in the BNC and WBO:

- (50) a. Would the real Jack Lawrence please stand up? (BNC)
 b. Would someone please send for him (BNC)
 c. If anyone has spotted it, or knows about where life has in any way been affected by it, would they please let me know? (BNC)

This can also be used without question marks. This time this expression becomes closer to a directive. These examples without question marks can be found in large numbers both in the BNC and WBO:

- (51) a. Would Miranda's mummy please come to Lost and Found. (BNC)
 b. Would the other speakers please come to the front. (BNC)
 c. Would somebody please mail the result right after the game. (BNC)
 d. Would anyone who could help please contact the Secretary of the Club. (BNC)

Burchfield (1996:644) says that a question mark is not needed after a certain type of requests and he gives the following example:

- (52) Would passengers now on platform 2 please move to platform 3 if they wish to join the 8.50 train for Reading and intermediate stations.

3. Conclusion

When interrogatives express suggestions, offers or requests, these interrogatives have already lost the inquiry force. When this occurs, sometimes they still retain question marks and sometimes they have lost them. When they still retain question marks, these expressions show more polite suggestions, offers or requests, whereas when they have lost question marks, these suggestions, offers or requests sound brusque, or less polite, and they sometimes become closer to a directive or an order. Judging from a large number of instances, the omission of question marks in interrogatives is fairly well being practiced now in expressing suggestions, offers or requests.

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