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Whether you like it or not, this is a paper about *or not*

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The paper deals with the English expression *or not* and its Dutch counterpart *of niet*. It is argued that the phrase's meaning contribution is not descriptive (truth-conditional), but primarily pragmatic in nature, with a different interpretation depending on the exact context it is used in.

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1. Introduction

The present paper deals with the English expression *or not* and its Dutch counterpart *of niet*. The examples below illustrate two typical uses of this phrase:

(1) Whether we are wealthy or not, we are all part of the global economy.
    'Of we nou rijk zijn of niet, we maken allemaal deel uit van de wereldeconomie.'

(2) Ben je bereid in te grijpen of niet?
    'Are you willing to intervene or not?'

Dutch has at least one other usage of the phrase, exemplified in (3):

(3) Je committeert je of niet.
    You either commit yourself or not.

The phrase *or not* and its literal Dutch translation *of niet* consist of two high-frequency lexical items, corresponding to the logical operators ∨ and ¬, respectively. The contribution of the two phrases to the truth-functional content of the larger linguistic unit they are part of is highly trivial. Consider (1) above: the overall structure of this type of sentences boils down to a logical structure of the form in (4):

(4) $[P \vee \neg P] \rightarrow Q$

which of course reduces to

(5) Q

That is, (1) is truth-functionally equivalent to

(6)   We are all part of the global economy.

The situation in cases like (2) and (3) is only slightly different. Whatever the addressee's willingness to intervene, (2) strongly favors a positive answer to the question posed, and whether or not the addressee in (3) is prepared to commit himself seems irrelevant in light of the directive character of the utterance.

Given that the *whether…or* clause 'of… of niet' in these examples is vacuous in terms of truth-functional content, the question arises why it is used in the first place. It will be argued below that the phrase's meaning contribution is not descriptive (truth-conditional), but primarily pragmatic in nature, with a different interpretation depending on the exact context it is used in.

In the following sections, we will address the three subtypes we distinguished. The final section contains some closing remarks and suggestions for further research.

2.   The "*whether…or* type"

The first subtype to investigate is the one in (1), repeated as (7) below:

(7)   Whether we are wealthy or not, we are all part of the global economy.
        'Of we nou rijk zijn of niet, we maken allemaal deel uit van de wereldeconomie.'

We will refer to this type as "the *whether…or* type". The first thing to note is that the construction can occur both to the left and to the right of the matrix clause, without any difference in meaning:

(8)   We are all part of the global economy, whether we are wealthy or not.
        'We maken allemaal deel uit van de wereldeconomie, of we nou rijk zijn of niet.'

A clear difference between the English *whether…or* construction and its Dutch counterpart is that the constant parts of the English version can be merged, whereas this is completely impossible in Dutch:

(9)   We are all part of the global economy, whether or not we are wealthy.
        * 'We maken allemaal deel uit van de wereldeconomie, of of niet we nou rijk zijn.'

We have no explanation for this difference, apart from the observation that languages often appear to avoid repetition of words.[1]

The next thing to observe is that the English construction uses subordinate interrogative *whether*.[2] The Dutch equivalent of *whether* is subordinate interrogative *of* (cf. English interrogative *if*), as shown below:

(10)   Ik weet niet of dat waar is.
       'I don't know whether/if that is true.'

That is to say, Dutch has both coordinate and subordinate *of* in examples like (7) and (8), the latter one eliciting verb-final word order. The German equivalent of (10) likewise shows that we are dealing with subordination, as we find subordinate *ob* rather than coordinate *oder*:[3]

(11)   Ich weiss nicht ob das wahr ist.
       'I don't know whether/if that is true.'

Interrogative *of* in Dutch should be carefully distinguished from similarity *of* 'as if', which is also subordinate but does not take part in the *of…of niet* construction. Typical examples are (12) and (13):[4]

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1.   Guerzoni and Sharvit (2014) observe that the merged variant can license negative polarity items such as *anything* (*…whether or not anything …*) whereas the standard variant cannot (*… *whether anything or not…*). Exploration of this contrast and of the possible consequences for the analysis of the two variants is beyond the scope of this paper.

2.   In a number of the cases discussed in this paper, subordinating *whether* can be replaced by subordinating *if*. This is beyond of the scope of this paper, but cf. Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 973–5) for discussion of the factors that play a role in the distribution of the two alternatives.

3.   We note that subordinating *whether* in the *whether…or* construction lacks an overt lexical trigger. The same holds for subordinating *of* in Dutch and subordinating *ob* in German. Instead of postulating an underlying lexical item which triggers the *whether…or* clause and is deleted subsequently, we follow the approach advocated by Grosz (2012) in his insightful discussion of German (and English) optative constructions and polar exclamations. Both of these utterance types belong to what Evans (2007) and Boogaart & Verheij (2013) refer to as so-called insubordinations. Typical instances in Dutch are *alsof het nooit ophoudt* 'as if it never ends', *of het niet erg genoeg is* 'if it isn't bad enough', and *dat zulke dingen altijd 's nachts moeten gebeuren* 'that such things must always happen at night'. Many of these examples appear to have exclamatory force and should therefore be treated as having what Grosz (2012) would call expressive meaning instead of descriptive (truth-conditional) meaning. Cf. also Cremers (2016) for a cross-linguistic study of binary non-veridical sentential operators, that is, lexical elements introducing conditionals (German *wenn*, English *if*, Dutch *als*), embedded questions (German *ob*, English *whether*/*if*, Dutch *of*) and disjunctions (German *oder*, English *or*, Dutch *of*).

4.   The examples are from R. J. Peskens, *Twee vorstinnen en een vorst: verhalen*. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, [1975]: pp. 12 and 37, respectively.

(12) Ik had het gevoel of ik van glas was.
      'I had the feeling as if I was made from glass.'

(13) Het was of die stem als een mes in mijn rug werd geworpen.
      'It was as if that voice was thrown into my back like a knife.'

Note that fronting of the embedded question in (10) and (11) triggers inversion in Dutch and German: *Of dat waar is weet ik/*ik weet niet* and *Ob das wahr ist weiss ich/*ich weiss nicht*.[5] The absence of inversion in (7) indicates that *whether… or*-clauses are peripheral rather than central elements in that they cannot be analyzed as constituents of the matrix clause (Paardekooper (1971: 183–4), Haeseryn et al. (1997: 1297–1301)).

   The next issue to be addressed is the pragmatic contribution of the construction. In order to get a clearer perspective on this question, let us look at a variant of the construction without *not:*

(14) We are all part of the global economy, whether we are wealthy or poor.
      'We maken allemaal deel uit van de wereldeconomie, of we nou rijk zijn of arm.'

This *whether…or*-construction is about two alternatives that can be regarded as opposite endpoints of a scale in the sense of Horn (1972). As Horn convincingly shows, if something holds for the two endpoints of a scale, it also holds for all points in between, and therefore, by implication, for everything the scale applies to, which is exactly what (14) expresses.[6]

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5.   In our corpus data we find the following Dutch example of a fronted embedded question: *Of dat briefje er niet af kon, vroeg ik. Dat durf ik niet te geven.* 'Whether that note can't come off, I asked. I don't dare to give it.' (R. J. Peskens, *Twee vorstinnen en een vorst: verhalen*. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, [1975]: p. 36.)

6.   Scales can vary significantly. An interesting example is found in the Dutch translation of Peter Høeg's well-known 1992 Danish novel *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* ('Miss Smilla's feeling for snow' in the UK, 'Smilla's sense of snow' in the US), when a Danish policeman tells Smilla: *Wij maken helemaal geen verschil. Of het nou een pygmee is die naar beneden gevallen is of een zevenvoudige moordenaar en verkrachter, we doen alles wat we kunnen* 'We do not discriminate. Whether it's a pygmy that fell, or a serial killer and sex offender, we go all the way' (Peter Høeg, *Smilla's gevoel voor sneeuw: roman*. Translated from the Danish by Gerard Cruys. 3rd ed., Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1995: 28; UK-translation by F. David, London: Vintage Books, 2005: 23). The original Danish text, which is in some ways closer to Dutch than to English, differs from both in that it contains two occurrences of subordinate *om* 'whether' instead of subordinate *om* followed by coordinate *eller* 'or': *Vi gør ingen forskel, gør vi. Om det er en pygmæ, der er faldet ned, om det er en syvdobbelt morder og sædelighedsforbryder, så går vi hele vejen* (Peter Høeg, *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne*, København: Munskgaard/Rosinante, 1992: 31). A beautiful Flemish instance comes from Luuk Gruwez' *Het bal van opa Bing: verhalen, portretten, herinneringen* (Amsterdam,

Viewed in that light, the *whether…or not*-construction (P ∨ ¬P) we started with represents a special case of the more general *whether…or*-construction, the associated scale being the binary scale of truth (1) and falsity (0) when we are dealing with a disjunction of a proposition and its negation. In both cases, the *whether…or* construction functions as a necessarily true apodosis in a conditional which makes the matrix clause true by material implication. What this means is that we use the *whether…or* construction as an emphatic marker of veridicality (cf. Zwarts (1995) and subsequent literature), comparable to tags such as *I swear* or *really* (a use of *really* not discussed in Paradis (2003)). The rhetorical force of such expressions appears to be that they add a dimension of pragmatic urgency to the sentence they combine with, reinforcing the claim to truth.

A last aspect of this construction to note is the frequent occurrence in Dutch of the pragmatic particle *nou*, as in (15).

(15)   Whether we are wealthy or not, we are all part of the global economy.
       'Of we nou rijk zijn of niet, we maken allemaal deel uit van de wereldeconomie.'

Nou 'now' is a colloquial variant of more formal *nu* 'now', but the semantics of the particle is definitely not temporal in many cases. The exact role of Germanic pragmatic particles is notoriously difficult to describe. Grosz (2012) classifies *nou* as an optative particle on the basis of *Als Jan nou naar Marie had geluisterd!* 'If only John had listened to Mary!'. We don't know how to characterize the function of *nu* and *nou* in the examples under investigation (cf. Van As (1992); also Van der Wouden (2015) for the so-called Barabbas construction), but it is clear that these particles are common in this construction. Moreover, the German construction often has the cognate *nun* 'now':

(16)   Ob ihr nun esst oder trinkt oder was ihr auch tut, das tut alles zu Gottes Ehre.[7]
       'Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all this to the honour of God.'

Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers, 1994: 37): *En of wij nu het gregoriaans van de dodenmissen voor onze snel stervende meesters moesten zingen of de zoetelijke Marialiederen van de maand mei, alles tingelde en beierde als klankgekregen meisjesgoed.* 'Whether we had to sing the Gregorian chants of the funeral Masses for our teachers who died quickly or the sweetish Maria songs of the month of May, everything was tinkling and ringing like sonorous girl's clothes'.

7.   http://www.die-bibel.de/bibeltext/1.Korinther%2010,33/ (Luther Bibel 1984).

3.   The "question *or not* type"

The second type of *or not* is exemplified in (2) above, repeated below as (17):

(17)   Ben je bereid in te grijpen of niet?
'Are you willing to intervene or not?'

We will refer to this construction as the "question *or not* type". In the example in (17), the question is in canonical form, that is, it has the form of a V1 sentence, with the inflected verb in first position. The construction, however, occurs with V2 questions as well, that is, with questions with the word order of assertive sentences, especially if a particle such as *toch* is present:[8]

(18)   Je bent toch achtentwintig, of niet?
'You are twenty-eight, or not/aren't you?'

Notice that the Dutch question *or not* type has two English counterparts: *You are twenty-eight, or not?* and *You are twenty-eight, aren't you?* The tag *aren't you* is noteworthy because the contracted form *aren't* involves two non-adjacent elements, judging by the acceptability of (chiefly British) *You are twenty-eight, are you not?* (in cases such as the negative imperative *Don't you dare!* the contraction is obligatory).
      From the fact that English uses *or* rather than *whether*, we assume that Dutch *of* in this construction is the coordinating variant. Additional evidence comes from the fact that German has *oder nicht* and not *ob nicht:

(19)   Bist du glücklich oder nicht?
'Are you happy or not?'

In the German version, V2 order appears to be acceptable as well,

(20)   Du bist doch verliebt? Oder nicht?
'You are in love, aren't you? Or are you not?'

Note again the presence of the (question marking) particle *doch*, a cognate of Dutch *toch* in (18).[9]
      An alternative construction uses the disjunctive operator *entweder*, comparable to English *either*.

(21)   Entweder du bist verliebt oder nicht.
'Either you are in love or not.'

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8.   On *toch*, see Snel (2011).

9.   On German *doch* vs. Dutch *toch*, see Foolen (2003).

Returning to our original example (17), the next issue to address concerns the meaning of the construction. Semantically, the addition of *or not*/*of niet*/*oder nicht* to a question turns the utterance into an urgent request for a clear, unambiguous answer, preferably positive. We claim that the question in (17) is typically addressed to someone who is still hesitating whether or not to intervene. Instead of leaving room for alternatives, the expected answer is that the addressee will be willing to intervene. In this sense, then, the question appears to have the strength of a directive: it narrows down the range of possible answers to an unequivocal 'yes' or 'no', ruling out limiting conditions, hesitations or doubts.

We cannot think of a lexical counterpart of this construction, a word or expression whose sole or main function is to strengthen speech acts; this explains perhaps why the *or…not* construction exists to begin with.

Questions with *or not* can be embedded as well:

(22) Als ik zelf om de hoek ben, dringt zich de vraag op of ik hier nu over kan schrijven of niet?[10]

'When I am around the corner myself, the question imposes itself whether I can write about this or not.'

Superficially, this variant looks like an instance of the *whether…or not* construction discussed in the first section of this paper. There are, however, at least two crucial differences between the two types of *or…not*: firstly, subordinating *of*/*whether* is triggered by a lexical element (in this case by the noun phrase *de vraag* 'the question'), and secondly, the embedded question can often only occur after its trigger, whereas the *whether…or not* construction was shown to occur both in front and at the end of the matrix clause.

To conclude this section, we want to point out that *toch* is not the only particle that feels at home in V2 questions such as (18). We likewise find the particle *nou* discussed above in relation to (15) in V1 constructions like (23–24):

(23) Ben je nou bereid in te grijpen of niet?
      'Are you willing to intervene or not?'

(24) Kom je nou naar huis?
      'Please come home.'

Just like the *of…niet* construction, this *nou* strengthens the speech act: the question and the request become more urgent when the particle is added.

Note that the position of the particle is crucial to get this interpretation: in (25), where *nou* occurs outside the middle field, only a temporal reading is possible;

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10. Martin Bril, *Vaders en dochters*. 4th ed., Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2008: 114.

(26) shows that both positions can be filled with *nou*; the first *nou* can only get the particle interpretation, the second one only the temporal one:

(25)   Ben je bereid nou in te grijpen of niet?
       'Are you willing to intervene now or not?'

(26)   Ben je nou bereid nou in te grijpen of niet?
       'Are you willing to intervene now or not?'

4.   The "assertion *or…not* type"

The last type of *or…not* construction to be discussed is exemplified in (3) above and repeated here as (27):

(27)   Je committeert je of niet.
       'You either commit yourself or not.'

As *of…niet* occurs here with a sentence that at least looks like an assertion, we will refer to this type as the "assertion *or…not* type". Another example of this construction is (28) which is mentioned as a "seemingly contentless assertion" ("schijnbaar inhoudloze bewering") in Renkema et al. (2016) (with reference to Watzlawick et al. (1967)), but not analyzed any further.

(28)   Zoals u wellicht weet of niet (weet)…
       'As you perhaps know or not (know)…'

The first thing to note about this type is that we are, again, dealing with coordinate *of*, witness English *or* in the translation.

    Next, as the example in (28) shows, it is possible in this type to repeat parts of the assertion. The long variant of (27) would be (29):

(29)   Je committeert je of je committeert je niet.
       'You either commit yourself or you don't commit yourself.'

This repetition of material is impossible in the first two types. Furthermore, the construction is also possible with sentence fragments rather than full propositions:

(30)   Graag of niet.
       Please or not.
       'Take it or leave it'

This possibility, however, is restricted to a few lexical items: you cannot replace *graag* in (30) by just any adjective/adverb. Moreover, *graag of niet* can be used as a predicate complement in a copula construction (31), and it can be emphasized by the addition of the adverb *helemaal* 'completely', as in (32):

(31)   Het is graag of niet.
       It is please or not.
       'Take it or leave it.'

(32)   Graag of helemaal niet.
       Please or completely not.
       'Take it or leave it.'

Both facts suggest, in our view, that *graag of niet* is a lexicalized combination.

Let us now return to example (29). Given that the addition of *or not* 'of niet' is vacuous in terms of truth-functional content, every individual either being committed or not, the question arises again why the utterance is used in the first place. We claim that the meaning of the example in (29) is not descriptive (truth-conditional), but primarily pragmatic in nature, with a different interpretation depending on the exact context it is used in. In one scenario, (29) is uttered towards an addressee who is still hesitating whether or not to commit himself. In that case, the function of the utterance is to end the addressee's hesitation and to urge him to make a wholehearted decision. In a second scenario, (29) is uttered after the addressee has in fact committed himself. In this case, the function of the utterance is to urge the addressee to accept the full consequences of being committed. Both interpretations differ from the purely descriptive meaning of (29) in that they do not involve the properties the addressee has, but the properties the addressee should have according to the speaker. In this sense the meaning of (29) can be regarded as expressive rather than descriptive (Grosz (2012)), the second interpretation being stronger than the first one in terms of an implicit contextual scale of commitment.[11]

A final aspect of this type of *or not* is that our corpus data did not yield any interesting cases of pragmatic particles. According to our intuitions, however, final *hoor* (the grammaticalized imperative form of *horen* 'to hear') should be possible. A Google search yielded quite a number of examples, including the following:

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11.   In this sense, the use of *or not* has a reinforcing function comparable to that of certain pragmatic particles discussed in Vismans (1994). The notion of strength introduced by Kadmon and Landman (1993) in their analysis of *any* is different in that it is based on entailment relations between assertions. They do observe, however, that their notion of strengthening can be seen as a lexicalization of a pragmatic function. In their view, *any* in *Any owl hunts mice* induces widening of the interpretation of the common noun phrase along a contextual dimension. This implies, as they note, that *any* can be regarded as a particular kind of emphatic particle, whose role is to create a stronger statement. In much the same way *or not* and its Dutch counterpart *of niet* can be analyzed as emphatic expressions that serve to create stronger statements along a contextual dimension.

(33)   Het is graag of niet, hoor.[12]
       'Take it or leave it, mind you.'

The possibility of *hoor* with this construction is consistent with the analysis of *hoor* proposed by Kirsner and Deen (1990), who observe that the final particle *hoor* typically conveys the message that the speaker does not admit contradiction – a message that squares of course nicely with the directive character of the construction.

5.   Concluding remarks

In the preceding sections, we discussed various uses of *or…not* and its Dutch counterpart as an appendage and distinguished three different types. The first one is the *whether…or not* construction (more generally, the *whether…or* construction), exemplified by *We are all part of the global economy, whether we like it or not*, in which, we claim, the appended *whether…or not* clause is used as an emphatic marker of veridicality, comparable to tags such as *really* or *I swear*. The rhetorical force of such expressions appears to be that they reinforce the claim to truth.

The second type involves appending *or not* to a yes/no-question, as in our example *Are you willing to intervene or not?* Semantically, the addition of *or not* turns the utterance into an urgent request for a clear, unambiguous answer, preferably positive. We claim that this sentence is typically addressed to someone who is still hesitating whether or not to intervene. Instead of leaving room for alternatives, the expected answer is that the addressee will be willing to intervene. In this sense, then, the question appears to have the strength of a directive: it significantly reduces the range of possible answers, pressing the addressee for an unequivocal 'yes' or 'no', ruling out limiting conditions, hesitations or doubts.

Our third type appends *or not* to an assertion, as in *You (either) commit yourself or not*. We claim that the meaning of this example is not descriptive (truth-conditional), but primarily pragmatic in nature, with a different interpretation depending on the exact context it is used in. In one scenario, the sentence is uttered towards an addressee who is still hesitating whether or not to commit himself. In that case, the function of the utterance is to end the addressee's hesitation and to urge him to make a wholehearted decision. In a second scenario, the sentence is uttered after the addressee has in fact committed himself. In this case, the function of the utterance is to urge the addressee to accept the full consequences of being committed. Both interpretations differ from the purely descriptive meaning of the sentence in that they do not involve the properties the addressee has, but the properties

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12.   Tess Franke, *Maskerade*, Amsterdam: Ambo/Anthos, 2011: 268.

the addressee should have according to the speaker. In this sense the meaning of the sentence can be regarded as expressive rather than descriptive (Grosz (2012)), the second interpretation being stronger than the first one in terms of an implicit contextual scale of commitment.

What the three constructions appear to have in common is that they express pragmatic urgency. In the case of *whether…or* (*not*) it is the explicit appeal to all of the points of an associated scale that lends urgency to the proposition it attaches to, making its proclaimed truth more salient. When we append *or not* to a yes/no-question, we turn it into an urgent request for an unequivocal 'yes' or 'no', ruling out any other option. Finally, attaching *or not* to an assertive sentence serves to make the addressee aware of the pressing need to accept the full consequences of a positive attitude.

During our discussion we occasionally touched upon the role of pragmatic particles within the matrix clause of the construction. A fact we did not mention yet is that particles occur in the *or not* appendage as well. Two clear cases are presented in (35) and (36), both of which differ from (34) in that the appendage contains modal *toch* (cf. German *doch*) or modal *soms*.[13]

(34) Crit is een hele goede docent, of niet?
'Crit is a very good teacher, or not?'

(35) Crit is een hele goede docent, of toch niet?
'Crit is a very good teacher, or PART not?'

(36) Crit is een hele goede docent, of niet soms?
'Crit is a very good teacher, or not PART?'

Compared to (34), the sentence in (35) expresses hesitation, whereas (36) is much more assertive in that it does not seem to admit contradiction. Fortunately, we happen to know from reliable sources that (36) is more in accordance with the state of affairs in the real world than (34) or (35).

Acknowledgements

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13. Cf. Van der Auwera (1984) for an analysis of this use of Dutch *soms* in a contrastive framework involving Polish *czasem* as well. Modal *soms* differs from frequentative *soms* 'sometimes' in that it is restricted to questions and the antecedents of conditionals, which suggests that the appendage *of niet soms* in (36) functions as a question.

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