Propositions, updates, speech acts - what is involved in "won't you?" questions tags in American English?

Sophia A. Malamud
Brandeis University
smalamud@brandeis.edu

Tatjana Scheffler
Universität Potsdam
tatjana.scheffler@uni-potsdam.de

We examine the question tag *won't you?* in American English. We start by noting that the effect of the anchor+tag (1a) differs markedly from (1b), in which the anchor and the question appear as independent utterances.

(1) a. You will take care of her, won't you?
     b. You will take care of her. Won't you?

The contrast in the felicity conditions of (1) (e.g. the level of authority of the speaker over the hearer) shows that the tag prevents the anchor from realizing its full speech act effects. We conclude that (1a) represents a single speech act, rather than two separate ones.

At the same time, examples like (2) show that the tag cannot apply simply to the proposition denoted by the anchor, since the anchor does not denote a proposition (Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984).

(2) Why don't you hold me down outside for a moment, won't you?

Our proposal is two-fold. First, we claim that the tag functions as a normal question (with VP-ellipsis), soliciting the addressee's answer regarding whether the addressee "will VP" (Searle 1976).

Second, the tag question modifies the discourse update of the anchor, so that the two are interpreted together: they address the same question under discussion, among other things. This can prevent the full effect of the anchor from being realised (1), and requires the anchor to involve an at-issue proposition that the addressee will perform a given action (2).

References: • Groenendijk, J., & Stokhof, M. (1984): On the Semantics of Questions and the Pragmatics of Answers. *Semantics: Critical Concepts in Linguistics.* • Ladd, D. R. (1981): A first look at the semantics and pragmatics of negative questions and tag questions. In *Proc. of CLS* 17. • Malamud, S. A., & Stephenson, T. (2014): Three ways to avoid commitments: Declarative force modifiers in the conversational scoreboard. *Journal of Semantics* 32(2). • Scheffler, T. (2009): Evidentiality and German Attitude Verbs. In *PWPL* 15(1). • Searle, J. R. (1976): A classification of illocutionary acts. In *Language in society* 5(1).