Preference in Construction Grammar – The case of question formation

Jan-Ola Östman, University of Helsinki, jan-ola.ostman@helsinki.fi

Tomas Lehecka, Åbo Akademi University, tomas.lehecka@abo.fi

If you – out of the blue – ask someone to "Give me a sentence!", you will most likely receive a transitive, active, declarative, positive statement. If you ask someone to "Ask a question!", it is not obvious whether you will receive a yes/no-question or a Wh-question. But the preferene *is* a relevant linguistic point comparable to questions of whether – and when – one uses an active or a passive statement, or whether one uses oblique alternation or not. This study discusses the linguistic, demographic and other social factors that pertain to one's choice of whether to ask a yes/no-question or a Wh-question; and what the parameters are that affect such a choice.

In a large-scale survey, we asked international experts on linguistics (n = 538) what – in their opinion – the general public should ideally know about language. We furthermore asked them to formulate their responses as questions that everyone should know the answer to. We received 3,349 suggestions for questions; many of the linguists' questions were in the form of yes/no-questions, like *Are some languages better than others?*, others were in the form of wh-questions like *Why are some languages not better than others?* We report our findings from content analyses (themes and topics) of the responses in Lehecka & Östman (2022, 2023, submitted). Here we examine the responses from a constructional point of view.

So, do linguists' different sociocultural backgrounds influence what types of questions they prefer to formulate? And if they do, should such preferences for question formation be taken into account in a constructional description of language, and how could this best be done? Theoretically, the study is a contribution to discourse-level constructional analyses (cf. Fillmore 1982 on interactional frames, Östman 2005 on Construction Discourse, Hollmann 2013 on socio-cognitive linguistics, and Enghels & Sol Sansiñena 2021.)

Of the 3,349 questions we received, 74% were formulated as Wh-questions (e.g. *What is a dialect?*); 22% were yes/no-questions (e.g. *Are some dialects better than others?*); and 3% were imperatives (e.g. *Explain the difference between a language and a dialect*). Here we concentrate on the Wh- vs. yes/no-question alternation. We find that linguists from the Nordic countries in Europe use Wh-questions significantly more often than what linguists from the Anglosphere do (encompassing the U.S.A., the U.K., Australia etc.), and that respondents from the U.S.A., in particular, prefer to use yes/no-questions. In our presentation, we will also deal with different types of Wh-questions and different types of yes/no-questions.

In evaluating the significance of our results, it is important to note that we did not find any difference in the use of specific question words or verbs, and we controlled for the effects of age, gender and linguistic-subfield affiliation. We also controlled for the amount of time respondents took to give their suggestions. All in all, we are thus confident in claiming that the results we do find are truly a reflection of preference for one question type rather than the other. That is, at some level of abstraction, the two alternative question constructions – the YES-NO QUESTION CONSTRUCTION and the WH-QUESTION CONSTRUCTION – are equally accessible, at least to linguists.

We can thus say that the respondents' choice between the YES-NO QUESTION CONSTRUCTION and the WH-QUESTION CONSTRUCTION is not only semantically governed, but also contextually governed: people with different demographic backgrounds favor different ways of posing questions, at least general questions about language. This kind of *preference* needs to be incorporated in a full description of the construction grammar of a language, and will thus add to previous work that shows that context needs to be made part of construction grammatical descriptions, e.g. in the form of discourse attributes in Construction Discourse, where variation is described as an interplay between discourse attributes and internal attributes of a construction (e.g. Östman 2015). The study discusses the extent and manner in which constructional approaches to language need to deal with preferences of this kind, the preference for asking a yes/no vs. a Wh-question.

References

Enghels, Renata & María Sol Sansiñena (eds.) 2021. *Discourse-level phenomena in construction grammars*. Special Issue of *Constructions and Frames* (13:1).

Fillmore, Charles J. 1982. Frame semantics. In *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*. Linguistic Society of Korea. Seoul: Hanshin.

Hollmann, Willem B. 2013. Constructions in cognitive sociolinguistics. In Thomas Hoffman and Graeme Trousdale (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar*, Oxford: Oxford University Pres

Lehecka, Tomas & Jan-Ola Östman. 2022 . What should everyone know about language? On the fluidity of important questions in linguistics. *Finnish Journal of Linguistics 35*: 67–97. https://journal.fi/finjol/issue/view/8954

Lehecka, Tomas & Jan-Ola Östman. 2023. Toward establishing what linguists think the general public should know about language: Salient vs. important issues in linguistics. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 17 (2), e12482. https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12482

Lehecka, Tomas & Jan-Ola Östman. Submitted. What linguists think everyone should know about language: On analyzing open-ended responses.

Östman, Jan-Ola. 2005. Construction discourse: A prolegomenon. In *Construction Grammars. Cognitive grounding and theoretical extensions* (121-144), ed. by Jan-Ola Östman & Mirjam Fried. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Östman, Jan-Ola. 2015. From construction grammar to construction discourse ... and back. In *Konstruktionsgrammatik V: Konstruktionen im Spannungsfeld von sequenziellen Mustern, kommunikativen Gattungen und Textsorten* (15-44), ed. by Jörg Bücker, Susanne Günthner & Wolfgang Imo. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.