

German ‘no matter wh-’: Exploring gradience through the lens of usage-based Construction Grammar

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In usage-based Construction Grammar (CxG), linguistic competence is modelled as a network of cognitively entrenched and socially conventionalised form-function pairings, called constructions (Ziem 2015:3–9). These are instantiated in language use as constructs, i.e. as authentic, observable tokens (Hoffmann 2022:4). Since the description of constructions is typically based on clearly defined sets of formal and functional properties, CxG suggests that constructs can be assigned unambiguously to fixed constructions (Imo 2006:286). This perspective on language is problematic in light of syntactic gradience, which involves difficult-to-classify constructs and hence implies fuzzy boundaries between constructions.

A case in point is the syntactic gradience among IRR *w*-type constructs in present-day German, which consist of an expression of irrelevance (IRR) meaning ‘no matter’, such as *gleichgültig* (lit.: ‘equally valid’), *egal* (lit.: ‘equal’) or *wurscht* (lit.: ‘sausage’), and a *w*-word such as *was* ‘what’ or *wer* ‘who’. In German, these constructs are on a cline of syntactic variation which ranges from (1) via (2) to (3) and is the topic of an ongoing investigation:

- (1) Iwan Stolz erfüllt Jobs, reist, gammelt, heiratet, zeugt ein Kind. *Gleichgültig was*: er wollte entkommen. (Die Zeit, 12/09/1975)
‘Iwan Stolz does jobs, travels, loafs about, marries, produces offspring. No matter what: he wanted to escape.’
- (2) Ich kann nicht sagen, die sind eh zu blöd, ich ziehe meine Sache durch, *wurscht, was*. (Falter, 18/09/2002)
‘I can’t say, “Those are too stupid anyway; I’ll do my thing, no matter what.”’
- (3) [der sächsisch nuschelnde Barmann bot uns dann aber an], in *egal was* Blue Curaçao hineinzukippen. (die tageszeitung, 13/03/2012)
“In a Saxonian mumble, the bartender then offered to add a shot of Blue Curaçao to anything (lit.: ‘no matter what’).”

In (1), *gleichgültig was* ‘no matter what’ functions as a verbless concessive-conditional clause (cf. Leuschner 2006:59–62), which dismisses Iwan Stolz’s activities as irrelevant to the fact that he wanted to escape. In (3), however, the combination of an expression of irrelevance and a *w*-word forms a “free-choice indefinite pronoun” (Haspelmath 1997:48–52), inviting the reader to freely choose the desired instantiation of the variable expressed by the *w*-word. The expression *wurscht, was* ‘no matter what’ in (2) occupies an intermediate position. It can be interpreted as a verbless concessive-conditional clause meaning ‘no matter what happens’, but also as an appositive free-choice indefinite pronoun quantifying over the NP *meine Sache* ‘my thing’.

In my paper, I pursue the empirical goal of documenting the cline between verbless concessive-conditional clauses like (1) and free-choice indefinites like (3), and the theoretical goal of determining how this cline can be described from the perspective of usage-based CxG. The empirical goal will be addressed through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of approximately 750 tokens from the German Reference Corpus DeReKo, which are being selected manually from a dataset of around 25,000 tokens, originally collected as part of a related project. The paper thus provides a description of grammatical structures in the transitional zone between concessive conditionality and free-choice indefiniteness which have received hardly any attention so far (see however Leuschner 2006:59–62). To achieve the theoretical goal, I will investigate how well the cline between (1) and (3) can be captured using three concepts that have been proposed in the literature to deal with difficult-to-classify constructs: open constructions (Hopper 2004), intersective constructional gradience (Aarts 2007:180–192) and conceptual blend (Hoffmann 2019, 2022:278–281). Preliminary results suggest that the syntactic variation between (1) and (3) can best be modelled in terms of ‘open constructional gradience’, a novel concept that draws on features of both open constructions and intersective constructional gradience. By introducing the concept of open constructional gradience, my paper adds to a construction-grammatical perspective on syntactic gradience.

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