Constructions in context
The reactive what-x construction in English conversation
Pöldvere, Nele; Paradis, Carita

2018

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

Creative Commons License:
Unspecified

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Constructions in context:  
The reactive what-x construction in English conversation

In the process of compiling a new corpus of contemporary spoken British English, the London-Lund Corpus 2 (LLC-2), we hit upon a construction that had not previously been dealt with in the literature, namely the reactive what-x construction. An example of the construction from LLC-2 is given in italics in (1).

```
(1) A:  I liked mathcore  
      B:  it was terrible  
      A:  it wasn’t terrible what [you liked all of it]  
      B:  [the first three] no I didn’t the first three were terrible¹
```

Prompted by this discovery, we carried out a detailed analysis of the construction to determine its form-meaning and interactive functional properties in spoken dialogue.

This study is couched in the framework of Construction Grammar (CxG) within Cognitive Linguistics. CxG is a model of grammar that subscribes to the idea that language is constituted by conventionalized form-meaning pairings, so-called constructions (Goldberg, 2006). CxG takes as its starting point a relatively stable conception of language and emphasizes the abstractions and generalizations that speakers/writers make across concrete tokens of language use, rather than focus on features that arise in the dynamic negotiation of meaning in context. Still, there have been a number of laudable attempts to straddle the gap between grammar and interaction (e.g. Fried & Östman, 2005; Linell, 2009), as long as the conception of construction is extended into the realm of dialogicity and communication. This is exactly what this study aims to do based on the analysis of the reactive what-x construction in a sample of spontaneous face-to-face conversation samples from LLC-2.

The corpus analysis of the formal properties of the reactive what-x construction revealed that the construction features the interrogative pronoun what directly followed by a phrasal or clausal complement x. Moreover, what always forms one tone unit with its complement and never carries a nuclear pitch accent. An analysis of its semantic properties showed that the construction is used to express a reaction to something said by another speaker in the immediately preceding turn. Hence, the construction is sequentially dependent on prior discourse. A closer look at the contexts in which the construction occurs, however, suggests that reaction constitutes only its meaning potential and that the construction is in fact polyfunctional in spoken dialogue. The dialogic functions are: requests for verification, requests for information and adversative statements, which express disagreement (as illustrated in (1) above). Hence, this study makes two important contributions to language research: (i) to provide a definition of the reactive what-x construction and (ii) to propose a theoretical development of CxG involving a broadening of the concept of construction to cover not only the lexical semantic pairing but also prosodic properties and the role of the construction in the interactive dialogic frame in speech.

References

¹ Square brackets represent overlaps.