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“What cause you were knackered?” The reactive what-x construction in two corpora of Present-Day spoken English

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Many studies have investigated lexico-grammatical items that have undergone change in Present-Day spoken English (e.g. Leech et al. 2009; Bowie et al. 2013; McEnery et al. 2017), but most of them have been concerned with time spans of up to 20–25 years. With the compilation of the London-Lund Corpus 2, we are, for the first time and in a truly comparable way, able to track changes in spoken English over the past 50 years. This study focuses on one of these changes, the rise of the reactive what-x construction.

(1) A: thank God you added in Judith she’d been so upset
   B: what with her photograph not being [credited]
   A: [well no] no no no no no¹

What in (1) is not a typical interrogative pronoun but a syntactically “aberrant” and prosodically integrated construction with an attitudinal function, enhanced by the falling intonational contour at the end of the tone unit. B does not only elicit information from A but does it in a way that makes the speaker’s negative attitude explicitly known. This study is couched in the framework of Construction Grammar (Fried & Östman 2005; Goldberg 2006). By systematically studying the usage constraints of the reactive what-x construction and its functions in dialogues, we show that the construction is a novel one in contemporary English and has acquired, and continues to acquire, other functions in addition to the interrogative one.

The data come from two comparable corpora of spoken British English consisting of half a million words each, the London-Lund Corpus (LLC-1) and the London-Lund Corpus 2 (LLC-2). LLC-1 contains data from the 1950s–1980s, and LLC-2 from 2015–2018. In this study, we focus on private face-to-face conversations, and an equal number of such texts were drawn from each corpus. All instances of what were first automatically extracted and then manually checked for cases where what was utterance-initial and prosodically integrated with the rest of the utterance, which could be phrasal or clausal. These constructions were analysed with respect to a number of formal and functional parameters, such as syntactic structure, speech act and addressee uptake, to determine how those are cognitively and interactionally organised. The results of the analyses in LLC-1 and LLC-2 were then compared with respect to the occurrences of the different uses.

The analysis revealed that there are two major uses of the reactive what-x construction: question proper and intersubjective use. The questions proper roughly correspond to Stenström’s (1984) primary question acts and incorporate question types that vary in terms of syntactic structure and discourse orientation. They were found in both corpora. The intersubjective use, however, was only found in LLC-2, which suggests the development of a new function. We propose that, in dialogic discourse contexts, the reactive what-x construction has developed from primarily framing questions into primarily expressing speaker attitude with a backgrounded interrogative function, as illustrated in (1) above.

¹ Square brackets represent overlaps.
References