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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 conversations 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

- Fried, M., & Östman, J-O. (2005). Construction Grammar and spoken language: The case of pragmatic particles. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37, 1752–1778.
Goldberg, A. (2006). *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹ Square brackets represent overlaps.

Linell, P. (2009). Grammatical constructions in dialogue. In A. Bergs & G. Diewald (Eds.), *Context and Constructions* (pp. 97–110). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.