

SEMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF OPPOSITENESS BETWEEN THE CONSTITUENTS OF ENGLISH ALTERNATIVE INTERROGATIVE STRUCTURES

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This article presents the qualitative and quantitative results from a corpus-based study of the semantic relationships of oppositeness between the constituents of English alternative interrogative structures (EAISs). The findings reveal that there exist four types of oppositeness – lexical, contextual, morphological, and negative. Statistics show that the largest group includes AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) are contextually contrasted, while the smallest comprises AISs whose constituents display morphological (temporal and voice) contrast.

Key words: AISs (alternative interrogative structures), constituents, opposite, opposition, contrast

I. Introduction

This article explores the semantic relationships of oppositeness between the constituents of English alternative interrogative structures (EAISs). The qualitative and quantitative research is based on four corpora:

- English Fiction Corpus (EFC, 90 508 word forms) compiled by V. Spasova.
- English Corpus of Fiction Monologue (ECFM, 50 370 word forms) compiled by V. Spasova.
- Charlotte Face-to-Face Corpus of Spoken English (CFCSE, 90 630 word forms). It is part of a larger corpus of spoken English, the Charlotte Narrative and Conversation Collection (CNCC, 198 295 word forms), included in the Open American National Corpus (OANC).
- Switchboard Telephone Corpus of Spoken English (STCSE, 50 476 word forms). It is part of a larger corpus of spoken English, the LDC Switchboard corpus (3 019 477 word forms), included in the Open American National Corpus (OANC).

The term “alternative interrogative structure” (AIS) is used to denote a coordinate structure made up of two (or more) constituent units linked by the coordinator *or*. It is called “alternative” because the constituents represent two (or more) mutually exclusive alternatives. The structure is an example of phrasal coordination which (most often) occurs within the boundaries of a closed or open interrogative independent or subordinate clause, or an example of clausal coordination (usually) of closed interrogative independent or subordinate clauses, hence the name “interrogative”.

For instance, the AIS in ex. 1 consists of two NPs which occur within the boundaries of a closed interrogative independent clause, while that in ex. 2 is made up of two closed interrogative independent clauses.

(1) *Right, uh, is yours a, is it a, [(a slab foundation) (or pier and beam)]?* (STCSE)

(2) *[(Was that told to you) (or did you read that)]?* (CFCSE)

In the examples above and henceforth the constituents of the AIS are put in round brackets, while the AIS itself is in square brackets and is marked with a single underlining. The coordination marker *or* is regarded as belonging “with the coordinate that follows it” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1277) and on that account it is put in its round brackets. The abbreviated name of the corpus from which the example of AIS is taken follows the example and is enclosed in round brackets.

Corpora data reveal that the constituents of 122 AISs (47.7 %) out of the total of 256 AISs found in the four corpora convey opposite meanings. These AISs can be divided into four groups:

- AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) stand in a relationship of lexical opposition
- AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) stand in a relationship of contextual opposition
- AISs whose constituents stand in a relationship of morphological opposition
- AISs whose constituents stand in a relationship of negative opposition

II. Lexical opposition

Corpora evidence shows that the constituents (or some of their components) of some AISs display contrast on lexical level. In other words, these constituents (or some of their components) convey opposite lexical meanings.

There are 23 AISs in total – 3 in EFC, 2 in ECFM, 11 in CFCSE, and 7 in STCSE.

The AISs fall into three subgroups:

- AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) stand in a relationship of complementarity
- AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) stand in a relationship of antonymy
- AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) stand in a relationship of directional opposition

1. Complementarity

“Complementaries” are “members of two-term sets” (Palmer 1981: 96) which “divide some conceptual domain into two mutually exclusive compartments, so that what does not fall into one of the compartments must necessarily fall into the other” (Cruse 1986: 198–9). In other words, such lexical items occupy the two opposite poles of some scaled property, and there is no intermediate term.

Complementarity can be recognized by a simple test – a sentence in which both assumed complementaries are negated sounds anomalous (Cruse 1986: 199). Thus, the anomaly of ex. 3 proves that *male* and *female* are complementaries. These lexical units can be regarded as occupying the opposite ends of a scale, let’s say, the scale of gender of animate beings.

(3) **The cat is neither male nor female.*

Corpora data suggest that the constituents of a good number of AISs stand in a relationship of complementarity.

Sometimes the whole constituents of the AIS are complementaries. In the examples below the relationship of complementarity is established between the adjectives *formal* and *informal* (ex. 4) and the common nouns *persons* and *objects* (ex. 5). The latter pair is believed to be complementaries on the grounds that they encapsulate the oppositions “animate – inanimate” and “human – non-human”. In Cruse’s terms (1986: 198) these are “impure opposites” because they “encapsulate, or include within their meaning, a more elementary opposition”.

(4) *I don't know **if** they have any type of, uh, [(formal) (or informal)], spontaneous **or** routine drop ins of agencies ...* (STCSE)

(5) *Are you experiencing any difficulty identifying [(persons) (or objects)]?* (EFC)

More often, however, only components of the constituents of the AISs are complementaries. For instance, in ex. 6 the opposition is between the adjectives *state* and *private*. To my mind, the complementaries are disposed at the opposite ends of the scale of ownership.

(6) *Well, that's what she said to us, she said, "Now, do you all want him to go to a, [(a state college) (or a private college)]?"* ... (STCSE)

Similarly, in ex. 7 the opposition is between the common nouns *house* and *apartment* which are situated at the opposite poles of the scale of home.

(7) *Now, I agree with their right to, um, pursue their religion of choice in that, whatever manner they want to, but I think they also should respect the sanctity of the American home **whether** it be [(in a house) (or in an apartment)].* (STCSE)

2. Antonymy

In this article Cruse's views and terminology (1986: 204) are adopted, hence the term "antonymy" is used in its narrow sense, i.e. antonymy is regarded as a type of oppositeness on the same footing as complementarity (discussed in II.1 above) and directional opposition (discussed in II.3 below). It denotes the semantic relationship between the members of a specific group of lexical opposites called "antonyms".

Antonymy can be recognized by a simple test – a sentence in which both assumed antonyms are negated does not sound "paradoxical" because there is at least one intermediate lexical item that matches the described situation (Cruse 1986: 204). For instance, the sentence in ex. 8 below is not anomalous because the water in the jug can be *warm* or *cool*. Hence, *hot* and *cold* are antonyms.

(8) *The water in the jug is neither hot nor cold.*

Corpora evidence indicates that there are very few AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) are pure antonyms. Thus, in ex. 9 the antonyms are *much* and *little*. They are situated at the opposite poles of the scale of quantity. In my opinion, a likely intermediate term is *sufficient*.

(9) *They decided what schools I would attend, where I would live, and [(**how much**) (or **how little**)] I could spend.* (EFC)

Doubts may arise as to the status of antonyms of the constituents *hot* and *cool* of the AIS in ex. 10 below because the opposition is between a final term (*hot*) and what is generally considered an intermediate term (*cool*). Doubts, however, will be removed if we adopt Cruse's suggestion (1986: 212–3) that *cool* and *warm* should have two senses. With one of the senses they denote “a moderate degree of coldness” and hotness respectively, with the other they act as antonyms of *hot* and *cold* respectively. In other words, under certain circumstances “*warm* and *cool* behave like polar antonyms of *cold* and *hot*” (cf. Cruse 1986: 211–3 about a detailed discussion).

(10) *Is the temperature really [(hot) (or cool)]?* (CFCSE)

3. Directional opposition

A third type of oppositeness expressed by AISs is “directional opposition” which “can be seen in its purest form in the everyday notion of contrary motion (i.e. motion in opposite directions)” (Cruse 1986: 223). It is primarily “spatial” (i.e. motion along the spatial dimension or axis) but it can also be “temporal” (i.e. motion along the temporal dimension or axis) (*ibid.* 1986: 223 – 5). The lexical units that realize this type of opposition are called “directional opposites”.

The first subtype of directional opposites found in the corpora is that of “antipodals”. With them “one term represents an extreme in one direction along some salient axis, while the other term denotes the corresponding extreme in the other direction” (*ibid.* 1986: 224 – 5).

Corpora data, however, show that antipodals are not very common in English. When occurring, they usually encapsulate the vertical spatial opposition “up – down” as in ex. 12 below.

(11) *... and I made a Lotus spreadsheet and went through the year using all of our, our checkbook to figure out what we spent each time and whether we were [(over) (or under)] for each month ...* (STCSE)

The second subtype of directional opposites found in the corpora is that of “relational opposites” (Palmer 1981: 97 – 8; Cruse 1986: 231) or “converses” (Cruse 1986: 231). These are pairs of words “which express a relationship between two entities by specifying the direction of one relative to the other along some axis” (*ibid.* 1986: 231). Converses are perceived as words of opposite meaning only in the context of their relationship.

Corpora evidence suggests that usually only components of the constituents of the AISs are relational opposites.

Relational opposition is mainly spatial. It is exhibited by kinship terms such as *mom* and *dad* (ex. 12) and *sisters* and *brothers* (ex. 13). To my mind, the idea of *mom* entails that of *dad*, while the idea of *sister* entails that of *brother*. Following Cruse (1986: 231 – 2), we can say that *mom* and *dad* take opposite positions along the horizontal spatial axis of parents, while *sister* and *brother* stand at opposite locations along the horizontal spatial axis of siblings. In addition, both *mom* – *dad* and *sisters* – *brothers* can be thought of as instances of the gender opposition *female* – *male*.

(12) *So, when, when that comes up, does, is [(your mom primarily the one who would tell it (**or** your dad)]?* (CFCSE)

(13) *Do you have any, do you have any [(sisters) (**or** brothers)]?* (CFCSE)

III. Contextual opposition

Thorough investigation into corpora sentences shows that the constituents (or some of their components) of a large number of AISs communicate opposite meanings only in the context in which they occur (Rusinov & Georgiev 1996: 179, Boyadzhiev 2011: 150). For this reason they can be regarded as contextual opposites.

There are 56 AISs in total – 9 in EFC, 4 in ECFM, 28 in CFCSE, and 15 in STCSE.

Contextual opposition can be realized by individual lexical items which belong to one and the same part of speech. Thus, in the examples below the opposition is between the adjectives *spontaneous* and *routine* (ex. 14) and *poor* and *high* (ex. 15).

(14) *I don't know **if** they have any type of, uh, formal **or** informal, [(spontaneous) (**or** routine)] drop ins of agencies ...* (STCSE)

(15) *I think the only way they're gonna really get to the problem and solve it is to have equal funding for every school in the state **whether** you it's in [(a poor tax district) (**or** a high tax district)] ...* (STCSE)

Contextual opposition is very diverse. The following examples illustrate only part of this wide diversity.

In ex. 16 the opposition is between the common nouns *children* and *high school*. Context suggests that the speaker uses the word *children* to mean *elementary school*. In other words, the opposition is between two **educational stages**, viz. the elementary school and the high school.

(16) *Golly, I never really got into poetry. Yeah I had to take it, [(as children)? (Or high school)?]* (CFCSE)

In ex. 17 the implicated contextual opposition is between two equally possible but mutually exclusive properties of a credit card, viz. safe to use and dangerous to use. The adjective *hot* bears the meaning of “difficult or dangerous to deal with and making you feel worried or uncomfortable” (OALDCE 2006: 724).

(17) *As both Vandervoort and Wainwright knew, there were devices used by criminals to decide [(whether a credit card in their possession could be used again), (or if it was "hot")]*. (EFC)

The AIS in ex. 18 conveys the *part – whole* opposition which is made explicit by the indefinite pronouns *everything* (component of the first constituent) and *some* (component of the second constituent).

(18) *Um, do you remember everything that your mom, like when she's telling the story, [(do you remember everything she tells) (or is some of it you remember and some of it you don't)]?* (CFCSE)

The AIS in ex. 19 illustrates the opposition *particular – general*, viz. the school systems in Charlotte in particular as opposed to the school systems in the United States in general.

(19) *[(Do you feel like that's just in Charlotte that that's how the school systems are)? (Or do you feel like in general that's how high school is as opposed to college)?]* (CFCSE)

IV. Morphological opposition

Corpora data indicate that the constituents of 5 AISs (all of them in CFCSE) manifest contrast on morphological level. Three AISs display temporal contrast, the other two – voice contrast.

Predicators of different tenses are used to ask about the time when a given event takes place. In such cases the disjunctive relationship is realized by means of temporal contrast (Savova 1986: 171).

In ex. 20 the temporal contrast is between the forms of the verb *accept* for present perfect simple and for expressing futurity by means of *be going to* and *will*. In order to avoid repetition, the verb *accept* is left out of the second and third constituent.

(20) *Do you think they've become more ex, do you think [(they've accepted more what you've decided to do) (or that's going to take a while)? (Or if they ever will at all)?]* (CFCSE)

The AIS in ex. 21 illustrates the opposition *past – present*. *Used to tell* refers to an activity that “regularly happened in the past but no longer happens” in the present (Murphy 1994: 50). On the other hand, *tells* refers to a habitual activity in the present.

(21) *Do you ever, do you have any stories that, do you remember any stories [(that Daddy used to tell you) (or that daddy tells you)]?* (CFCSE)

The AIS in ex. 22 manifests voice contrast. The opposition is between the past simple forms of the verb *read* for active voice (in the first constituent) and for passive voice (in the second constituent).

(22) *All right, Megan, when you were growing up, do you remember any stories that [(you read) (or were read to you)] that uh, stick in your mind?* (CFCSE)

V. Negative opposition

In the corpora there are a large number of AISs, the second constituent of which is the negated equivalent of the first one.

These AISs are **38** in total – **5** in EFC, **2** in ECFM, **13** in CFCSE, and **18** in STCSE.

Depending on the degree to which the second constituent is expressed, the AISs can be divided into three subgroups:

- AISs whose second negated constituent is fully expressed
- AISs whose second negated constituent is reduced
- AISs whose second constituent is totally unexpressed

The forthcoming discussion agrees with Tisheva’s analysis (2000: 25 – 38) of the changes in the structure, semantics and uses of Bulgarian direct disjunctive questions as a result of ellipsis in the second disjunct. The author examines sentences of two-predicate structure containing the correlatives *dali – ili* and *li – ili*. My observations on English corpora sentences indicate that similar changes occur in the second constituent of EAISs.

1. AISs whose second negated constituent is fully expressed

These AISs are made up of two clauses, the second of which differs from the first only in the negative form of the verb realizing the predicator. In other words, these are AISs whose constituent clauses have the same verb lexeme but in the second clause it is negated (Savova 1986: 171), i.e. it is marked as negative by the negator *not*. The actions, activities or situations denoted by the clauses are incompatible or mutually exclusive (Tisheva 2000: 27 – 8).

Corpora evidence, however, reveals that in English it is very unusual for the two constituent clauses to occur in their full form. Such a rare case is ex. 23. The AIS represents a coordination of two non-finite *to*-infinitival open interrogative subordinate clauses.

(23) *I mean, I've never been told [(what to wear) (or what not to wear)].* (STCSE)

The negation in the second constituent can be defined as analytic secondary verbal *not*-negation with an expressed repeated alternative. It is “verbal” because “the marker of negation is grammatically associated with the verb” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 788). It is “analytic” because it is marked by *not*, one of those “words whose sole syntactic function is to mark negation” (*ibid.* 2002: 788). It is “secondary” because it contains “a secondary verb-form” (*ibid.* 2002: 788), viz. the plain form of the verb *wear* used in the *to*-infinitival clause *what not to wear*.

2. AISs whose second negated constituent is reduced

When the constituent clauses of the AIS differ only in the positive and negative form of the verb, the second constituent is usually subject to reduction. Reduction is due to the speaker’s desire to minimize the repetition of information that has already been provided by the first constituent.

Most often it is the whole second clause that is dropped except for the negator (Tisheva 2000: 28) *not* which takes the position immediately after the coordinator *or*. This type of negation in the second constituent can be defined as verbal *not*-negation with the second alternative expressed only by the negator. It is the main type of negation found with EAISs. It occurs in 23 out of the total of 38 AISs.

(24) *But of course when all the surrounding, the stores or whatever, everybody had lost money and so the whole economy was totally poor [(whether they actually lost money) (or not)].* (CFCSE)

(25) *Both of the ones I met have been really funny guys. I don't know if that's, uh, [(if that's true about all Puerto Ricans) (or not)].* (STCSE)

3. AISs whose second constituent is totally unexpressed

In the spoken corpora there are AISs with unexpressed second constituent. Nevertheless, in my opinion, there are good grounds to believe that the unexpressed constituent is the negative counterpart of the expressed one.

The reason to think that the second constituent of the AISs in ex. 26 and 27 is the negation of the first one lies in the fact that the direct alternative questions which the AISs form receive a negative answer and response although the head (auxiliary) verb in the first constituent is in positive form. In this respect I agree with the ideas put forward by Tisheva (2000: 30). To my mind, were they expressed, the second constituents of the AISs would be *don't you want to be a nurse anymore* (ex. 26) and *haven't you made a lot of vases and things* (ex. 27), or they would be all reduced to the negator *not*.

(26) A: [(Do you still want to be a nurse) (or—)]?

B: *Not anymore, no.* (CFCSE)

(27) A: *Well, pottery sounds interesting. [(Have you made a lot of, uh, a lot of vases and things) (or ...)]*

B: *No, I, I do ceramics.* (STCSE)

The AISs in ex. 28 and 29 also form or make part of sentences used as direct alternative questions. These questions, however, receive a positive answer and response. Nonetheless, I think that the addressee perceives the second constituent as the negative counterpart of the first one. It seems that the addressee simply does not wait for the speaker to finish the question by expressing the negative alternative because he knows with certainty that the positive alternative suggested by the first constituent is the correct one.

In my opinion, the second constituent of both AISs could be realized by the negator *not* so that the AIS in ex. 28 would look like *did you like it or not*, while that in ex. 29 would take the form of *did that affect the stuff, how a person fit in or not*.

(28) A: *And how was growing up in Charlotte? [(Did you like it) (or)]?*

B: *Yeah, I liked it a lot.* (CFCSE)

(29) A: *The money aspect is that, in your high school, [(did that affect stuff, how a person fit in) (or --)]?*

B: *It really did, because a lot of the people on my group, their friends were well off. They had awesome cars and they strutted around with their awesome clothes and the other people who didn't really didn't hang out with our group of friends.* (CFCSE)

VI. Conclusions

Corpora findings lead to the following conclusions about the semantic relationships of oppositeness between the constituents of EAISs:

1. There exist four types of oppositeness between the constituents (or between some of their components) of the AISs – lexical, contextual, morphological, and negative opposition.

2. The largest group includes AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) are contextually contrasted. Only in the context do they convey opposite meanings like educational stages, equally possible but mutually exclusive properties, the part – whole or the particular – general opposition.

3. Second in frequency come AISs whose constituents are contrasted by negation, i.e. the second constituent is the negated equivalent of the first one. In their turn, these AISs fall into three subgroups according to the degree to which the second constituent is expressed.

- AISs (very few) whose second negated constituent is fully expressed. Everything else being equal, the second constituent differs from the first only in the negative form of the verb.
- AISs whose second negated constituent is reduced, most often to the negator *not*. This is the most frequent type of negation.
- AISs whose second constituent is totally unexpressed. The unexpressed constituent is regarded as the negative counterpart of the expressed one because of the nature of the answer and response given to the direct alternative question which the AIS forms or makes part of.

4. Third in frequency come AISs whose constituents (or some of their components) are lexically contrasted. In their turn, they exhibit three types of oppositeness, viz. complementarity, antonymy, and directional opposition, with the first and the third types being much more frequent than the second. Oppositeness is usually realized by individual lexical items.

5. The smallest group comprises AISs whose constituents display morphological (temporal and voice) contrast.

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