

TYPES OF APPROXIMATION EXPRESSED BY ENGLISH AND BULGARIAN ALTERNATIVE INTERROGATIVE STRUCTURES

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The paper presents the results from a corpus-based study of the types of approximation expressed by English and Bulgarian alternative interrogative structures. Corpora data indicate that the meaning of approximation is much more characteristic of Bulgarian alternative interrogative structures than of their English counterparts. Depending on whether their constituents have exact values or one of them has a *wh-* (or *k-*) value, the alternative interrogative structures (AISs) fall into two groups – AISs that express approximation with exact values and AISs that express approximation with (an) exact value(s) and a *wh-* (*k-*) value. Different types of approximation are distinguished within each group.

Key words: alternative interrogative structure, meaning of approximation, exact value, *wh-* (*k-*) value, English, Bulgarian

I. Introduction

This paper presents the results from a corpus-based study of the types of approximation expressed by English and Bulgarian alternative interrogative structures (E&BAISs). An alternative interrogative structure (AIS) that expresses approximation signals that the speaker does not know, or does not remember, and does not consider it important to establish the truth value of one of the alternatives.

The initial research has been based on eight corpora – four English (two corpora of fiction works and two of spoken language) and four Bulgarian (two corpora of fiction works and two of spoken language). In this article, however, the types of approximation will be illustrated only by AISs that have been excerpted from corpora of spoken language. The reason is that the meaning of approximation has turned out to be much more typical of the AISs found in the corpora of spoken language than of those found in the corpora of fiction works. To be more specific, in the

corpora of spoken language there are 28 English alternative interrogative structures (EAISs) and 80 Bulgarian alternative interrogative structures (BAISs) which communicate the meaning of approximation. By contrast, in the corpora of fiction works there are no EAISs and only 8 BAISs which convey the aforementioned meaning. Also, statistics on AISs in the corpora of spoken language show that the meaning of approximation is 2.86 times as typical of BAISs as it is of EAISs.

The examples used in this article have been excerpted from the following corpora:

- 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).
- Corpus of Spoken Bulgarian *Aleksova* (CSB–A, 89 959 word forms) collected by Krasimira Aleksova, now a professor at the Faculty of Slavic Studies at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.
- Corpus of Spoken Bulgarian *Nikolova-Venkova* (CSB–NV, 50 000 word forms) collected by Tsvetanka Nikolova and Tzvetomira Venkova (the latter now being an associate professor at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”). It is part of a larger corpus of authentic conversations (100 000 word forms) which forms the basis of *Честотен речник на българската разговорна реч (A Frequency Dictionary of Colloquial Bulgarian)* by Tsvetanka Nikolova (1987).

Corpora evidence indicates that the constituents of the AISs either have exact values or one of them has a *wh-* (or *k-*) value because it has an interrogative *wh-* word (or a *k-* word) as a component. This in mind, we can divide the AISs into two groups:

- AISs that express approximation with exact values
- AISs that express approximation with (an) exact value(s) and a *k-* (*wh-*) value

II. Approximation with exact values

There are only 3 EAISs that express approximation with exact values – 2 in CFCSE and 1 in STCSE. Their Bulgarian counterparts, however, are 26 –16 in CSB–A and 10 in CSB–NV.

Different types of approximation can be communicated by the BAISs – numerical (or quantitative), temporal, situational and identification. The EAISs found in the corpora, however, denote only temporal approximation. Of course, the latter fact does not imply that EAISs cannot convey the other types of approximation.

1. Numerical (or quantitative) approximation

The meaning of numerical (or quantitative) approximation is expressed by BAISs whose constituents are cardinal numerals (ex. 1) or have a cardinal numeral as a component, hence the name of this type of approximation. Following Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1304), we can say that such AISs carry the implicature „Броят (или количеството) е или x , или y , горе-долу толкова/там някъде“ (“The number (or quantity) is either x or y , thereabouts”) where x and y are variables to which appropriate numerical values are assigned in each particular case.

In all examples henceforth the constituents of the AIS are put in round brackets, while the AIS is in square brackets and is marked with single underlining. The coordination markers and the interrogative *wh*- and *k*-words are in bold type. The abbreviated name of the corpus from which the example is taken follows the example and is enclosed in round brackets.

The AIS *осем ли, десет* (*were they eight or ten*) in ex. 1 allows the interpretation „Броят на бурканите беше или осем, или десет, горе-долу толкова/там някъде“ (“The number of the jars was either eight or ten, thereabouts”), *осем* (*eight*) and *десет* (*ten*) being the exact values for the variables x and y .

(1) *Вика: „За войника ти. Искам за Краси да му занесеш буркани.“* [*(Осем ли), (десет)*] *буркана наслага.* (CSB–NV)

Vika: “Za voynika ti. Iskam za Krasi da mu zanesesh burkani.”
[*(Osem li), (deset)*] *burkana naslaga.* (CSB–NV)

‘She said, “For your soldier. I want you to take some jars to Краси.” She put, were they eight or ten jars.’¹

¹ Single inverted commas indicate meaningful translation of the Bulgarian examples into English. Translation is mine.

2. Temporal approximation

The meaning of temporal approximation is conveyed by E&BAISs whose constituents are NPs (ex. 2 and 3) or clauses that bear the meaning of temporal location, hence the name of this type of approximation. The AISs allow the interpretation „Действието се разви/се развива или във време x , или във време y , горе-долу тогава/някъде по това време“ (“The action took place/is taking place either at time x or at time y , thereabouts”) where x and y are variables replaced by specific temporal values in each particular case.

Thus, *last year* and *year before last* are values for the variables x and y , which makes it possible to interpret the AIS *last year or year before last* in ex. 2 as “He was voted the sexiest actor in movies either last year or the year before last, thereabouts”. Similarly, the AIS *януари ли, февруари ли* (*was it January or February*) in ex. 3 implicates „Това се случи или през януари, или през февруари, някъде тогава“ (“This happened either in January or in February, thereabouts”), *януари* (*January*) and *февруари* (*February*) being the specific values for the variables x and y .

(2) *Well, you know, he was, uh, when was it, [(last year) (or year before last)], he was voted the sexiest actor in movies or something.* (STCSE)

(3) *Знайш какво значи, това беше [(януари ли), (февруари ли)], до юни тя не дойде в училището при мене.* (CSB–NV)

Znaysh kakvo znachi, tova beshe [(yanuari li), (fevruari li)], do yuni tya ne dojde v uchilishteto pri mene. (CSB–NV)

‘You know what, this happened was it in January or in February, she didn’t come on a visit to me in the school till June.’

3. Situational approximation

The meaning of situational approximation is communicated by BAISs whose constituents denote similar situations or actions. Such AISs hint „Ситуацията/действието е или x , или y , нещо такова/нещо подобно“ (“The situation/action is either x or y , something like that”) where x and y are variables to which specific values are attributed in each example.

For instance, the AIS *отишъл ли, помолил ли некого* (*did he go or did he ask somebody*) in ex. 4 consists of two VPs and implicates „Той или отишъл, или помолил някого, нещо такова“ (“He either went or asked somebody, something like that”).

(4) *И, като отишъл брат ми там той знаеше английски само, италиански беше малко учил в Етиопия. И той [(отишъл **ли**), (помолил **ли** некого)], обяснил там кой му е баща, баща ми предварително им беше писал и те казаха всичко ще се уреди. (CSB–NV)*

*I, kato otishal brat mi tam toy znaeshe angliyski samo, italianski beshe malko uchil v Etiopia. I toy [(otishal **li**), (pomolil **li** nekogo)], obyasnil tam koy mu e bashta, bashta mi predvaritelno im beshe pisal i te kazaha vsichko shte se uredi. (CSB–NV)*

‘And when my brother went there, he knew only English, he had studied a little Italian in Ethiopia. And he, did he go or did he ask somebody, he explained who his father was, my father had written to them in advance and they had replied that they would arrange everything.’

4. Identification approximation

The meaning of identification approximation is expressed by BAISs made up of two NPs. They aim at establishing the identity of an object. They allow the interpretation „Обектът е или *x*, или *y*, нещо такова“ (“The object is either *x* or *y*, something like that”) where *x* and *y* are variables substituted with specific values in each example.

Thus, the AIS „Време“ *ли*, „Екран“ *ли* (*was it Time or Screen*) in ex. 5 can be interpreted as „Името на студиото беше или „Време“, или „Екран“, нещо подобно“ (“The name of the program was either *Time* or *Screen*, something like that”). That this interpretation is correct is proved by the sentence which follows the one containing the AIS.

(5) С: Студио кво беше, „Време“ *ли*?

П: Студио [(„Време“ **ли**), („Екран“ **ли**)], не знам. Некакво е такова. (CSB–A)

S: *Studio kvo beshe, “Vreme” li?*

P: *Studio [(“Vreme” **li**), (“Ekran” **li**)], ne znam. Nekakvo e takova. (CSB–A)*

S: *‘What was the name of that program, was it Time?’*

P: *‘Was it Time or Screen Program, I don’t know. Something like that.’*

III. Approximation with (an) exact value(s) and a *k-* (*wh-*) value

EAISs that express approximation with (an) exact value(s) and a *wh-* value are 25 – 14 in CFCSE and 11 in STCSE. Their Bulgarian counterparts are 54 – 36 in CSB–A and 18 in CSB–NV.

According to the interrogative *k-* word that makes part of the final constituent, the types of approximation expressed by the BAISs can be determined as approximation with *колко*, *кога* and *какво*. Their English counterparts express approximation with *whatever* and *what*. Additionally, E&BAISs communicate hesitation with *or* and *или*.

1. Approximation with *колко/whatever*

This type of approximation is expressed by BAISs whose constituents are NPs that bear the meaning of number or quantity. The first constituent is either a cardinal numeral or has a cardinal numeral as a component, while the second contains the interrogative pronoun of number and quantity *колко* (Nitsolova 2008: 193) (*how much, how many*). *Колко* seeks to express a number or quantity similar to that expressed by the cardinal numeral in the first constituent. From a pragmatic viewpoint, it can be interpreted as „горе-долу толкова“ (“thereabouts”). The AISs themselves carry the implicature „Броят (или количеството) е *x* или горе-долу толкова“ (“The number (or quantity) is *x* or thereabouts”) where *x* is a variable replaced by an appropriate numerical value in each case.

There are two AISs in ex. 6 below. They both consist of “fused-head NPs” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 410). The AISs implicate „Платихме по петнайсе лева или горе-долу по толкова“ (“We paid fifteen levs each or thereabouts”) and „Платихме по десет лева или горе-долу по толкова“ (“We paid ten levs each or thereabouts”), *петнайсе* (*fifteen*) and *десет* (*ten*) being the exact values for the variable *x*.

(6) E: *Че една вечер в нощния бар с Иван пихме по кафе и той едно коняче и платихме по [(петнайсе ли), (колко)]*

I: *А, къде?*

E: *[(Десет ли), (колко)]... (CSB–A)*

E: *Che edna vecher v noshtnia bar s Ivan pihme po kafe i toy edno konyache i platihme po [(petnayse li), (kolko)]*

I: *A, kade?*

E: *[(Deset li), (kolko)]... (CSB–A)*

E: ‘*So one evening Ivan and I had coffee in the night bar and he drank a small cognac and we paid was it fifteen levs each or how much was it.*’

I: ‘*Ah, where?*’

E: ‘*Was it ten levs or how much was it ...*’

The only EAIS in the corpora that conveys the meaning of numerical approximation is also made up of two NPs. The first constituent has the cardinal numeral *eighteen thousand* as a component, while the second is realized by the pronoun *whatever*. *Whatever* correlates with the cardinal numeral and seeks to communicate a similar amount of money. Its pragmatic meaning is equivalent to “thereabouts”. Hence, the AIS allows the interpretation “The dollars are eighteen thousand or thereabouts” where *eighteen thousand* is the exact value for the variable *x*.

(7) *And you’re gonna think: Well, wait now, where’s [(the other eighteen thousand dollars) (or whatever)] coming in?* (STCSE)

2. Approximation with *кога*

This type of approximation is communicated by BAISs whose constituents are AdvPs (ex. 8), PPs (ex. 9) and NPs that convey the meaning of temporal location. The AISs have the interrogative adverb *кога* (ex. 8) or the interrogative pronoun *колко* (ex. 9) as a component of the second constituent, both of which seek to express a temporal meaning similar to that expressed by the first constituent. *Кога* and *колко* allow the pragmatic interpretation „горе-долу тогава/някъде по това време“ (“thereabouts”) so that the AISs can be interpreted as „Действието се разви/се развива/ще се развие във време *x* или горе-долу тогава/някъде по това време“ (“The action took place/is taking place/will take place at time *x* or thereabouts”) where *x* is a variable to which a specific temporal value is attributed in each example.

For instance, the AIS in ex. 8 implicates „Нещо ще се заформи утре или някъде тогава“ (“Something will happen tomorrow or thereabouts”), *утре* (*tomorrow*) being the value assigned to the variable *x*.

(8) *Баща ти, викам, след като аз говорих с тебе ли на обяд ти се, той ти се обади по телефона ли ... да ... да ... да, каза, че утре щяло да, нещо да се заформи нещо. Ми [(утре ли), (кога ли)]...* (CSB–A)

Bashta ti, vikam, sled kato az govorih s tebe li na obyad ti se, toy ti se obadi po telefona li ... da ... da ... da, kaza, che utre shtyalo da, neshto da se zaformi neshto. Mi [(ut্রে li), (koga li)]... (CSB–A)

‘*Your father, I’m saying, did he call you after I had spoken to you at lunchtime ... yes ... yes ... yes, he said that tomorrow something will, something will happen. Well, will it be tomorrow or when will it be ...*’

Likewise, the AIS in ex. 9 allows the interpretation „Маските ще се снемат в дванайсе часа или горе-долу тогава“ (“The masks will be taken off at twelve o’clock or thereabouts”).

(9) Той казва: „Да, знам го. Сега [в дванайсе ли], (в колко там)] ще се снемат маските и ще се види кой е, и всички ще се видим.“ (CSB–NV)

Toy kazva: “Da, znam go. Sega [v dvanayse li], (v kolko tam)] shte se snemat maskite i shte se vidi koy e, i vsichki shte se vidim.” (CSB–NV)

‘He says, “Yes, I know him. Now will it be at twelve or what time will it be, the masks will be taken off and we’ll see who he is, and we’ll see who everybody is.”’

3. Approximation with *какво/what*

We distinguish three subtypes of approximation with *какво/what* – situational, identification and characterization approximation.

3.1. Situational approximation with *какво*

This type of approximation is conveyed by BAISs, the first constituent of which is “a closed interrogative clause”, while the second is either “an open interrogative clause”² (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 853–854) (ex. 10) or an NP. The second constituent contains the interrogative pronoun *какво* (*what*) or its informal variant *кво*. As *какво* can designate “whole situations from real life and their reflections in human psyche”³ (Nitsolova 2008: 191), we can say that it seeks to denote a situation or an action similar to that denoted by the first constituent and therefore it carries the pragmatic meaning „нещо такова/нещо подобно“ (“something like that”). The AISs themselves can be interpreted as „Ситуацията/действието е *x* или нещо такова/нещо подобно“ (“The situation/action is *x* or something like that”) where *x* is a variable replaced by a specific value in each case.

Thus, the AIS in ex. 10 implicates „Той спи на обед или нещо такова“ (“He sleeps at noon or something like that”).

² The terms “closed interrogative clauses” and “open interrogative clauses” replace the traditional Bulgarian terms „въпросителни изречения с въпросителни частици“ (“interrogative sentences with interrogative particles”) and „въпросителни изречения с пълнозначни въпросителни думи“ (“interrogative sentences with full interrogative words”).

³ Translation of quotations from grammars by Bulgarian authors is mine.

(10) *Тоя се върте един час и не мой да заспи. Не знам, [(там на обед спи ли), (кво е ...)]* (CSB–NV)

Toya se varte edin chas i ne moy da zaspi. Ne znam, [(tam na obed spi li), (kvo e ...)] (CSB–NV)

‘He turned over in bed for an hour but he couldn’t get to sleep. I don’t know, does he sleep at noon or what is it.’

3.2. Identification approximation with *какво/what*

The meaning of identification approximation is communicated by E&BAISs whose constituents belong to various syntactic types – they can be NPs, closed interrogative clauses, open interrogative clauses, etc. The AISs aim at identifying an object. As in its basic meaning the interrogative pronoun *какво* (*what*) denotes “an object in the widest sense of the word” (Nitsolova 2008: 191), it is no surprise that it and its English counterpart *what* appear as components of the final constituents of the AISs. They both correlate with an NP in the first constituent and seek to communicate a meaning similar to that conveyed by that NP. On that account they can be interpreted pragmatically as „нещо подобно“ (“something like that”). In their turn, the AISs carry the implicature „Обектът е *x* или нещо такова“ (“The object is *x* or something like that”) where *x* is a variable to which a particular value is assigned in each example.

The AISs in ex. 11 and 12 implicate respectively „Това беше дамаджана или нещо подобно“ (“This was a demijohn or something like that”) and “This was a glider or something like that” where *дамаджана* (*a demijohn*) and *glider* are the specific values attributed to the variable *x*.

(11) *Един път минавахме през Левски и брат му ни караше с кола, те трябваше нещо да влязат да вземат [(някаква дамаджана ли), (какво)].* (CSB–NV)

Edin pat minavahme prez Levski i brat mu ni karashe s kola, te tryabvashe neshto da vlyazat da vzemat [(nyakakva damadzhanan li), (kakvo)]. (CSB–NV)

‘We were passing through Levski once and his brother was driving us, they had to go into the house to take was it some demijohn or what.’

(12) *... Well they looked like two big gliders flying over the base and they made a circle and come in and landed and I didn't know [(whether it was a glider) (or what it was)] I hadn't heard the name U2 when I first arrived.* (CFCSE)

3.3. Characterization approximation with *какво*

According to the corpora data, the meaning of characterization approximation is conveyed by BAISs that are instances of mixed clausal or phrasal coordination, e.g. a closed interrogative clause is coordinated with an open interrogative clause (ex. 13), an AP is coordinated with an NP (ex. 14), etc. The final constituent has an interrogative pronoun as a component. Most often this is *какво* (*what*) and sometimes it is a form of *какъв* (*what*). The use of *какъв* is no surprise as its basic meaning is to question properties of objects and persons (Nitsolova 2008: 192). The use of *какво* can be explained with the strong tendency among native Bulgarians to perceive this pronoun as a general substitute for an alternative that has not been stated explicitly. Both pronouns communicate the pragmatic meaning „нещо подобно/нещо такова“ (“something like that”) so that the AISs can be interpreted as „Признакът на обекта/човека е *x* или нещо подобно/нещо такова“ (“The property of the object/the person is *x* or something like that”) where *x* is a variable to which an appropriate value is assigned in each example.

For instance, the AISs in ex. 13 and 14 implicate respectively „Фирмата е американска или нещо такова“ (“The firm is American or something like that”) and „Той беше напудрен или нещо такова“ (“His face was powdered or something like that”). The pronouns *к’ва* and *какво* correlate with the adjectives *американска* (*American*) and *напудрен* (*powdered*) and seek to denote properties of the object *фирма* (*firm*) and the person *Хосе Карерас* (*José Carreras*) similar to those denoted by the respective adjectives.

(13) *Тая фирма, [(тая е американска ли), (к’ва е фирмата)], тя е много известна, ама не мога ти я кажа сега, ... (CSB–A)*

Taya firma, [(taya e amerikanska li), (k’va e firmata)], tya e mnogo izvestna, ama ne moga ti ya kazha sega, ... (CSB–A)

‘This firm, is it American or what is this firm, it is very popular, but I can’t tell you its name now, ...’

(14) *И той, а пък Хосе Карерас. Видя ли как изглежда? Гледа ... хубаво искам да кажа, ма той много хубав, той [(напудрен ли) беше, (какво)]. (CSB–A)*

I toy, a pak Hosa Kareras. Vidya li kak izglezhda? Gleda ... hubavo iskam da kazha, ma toy mnogo hubav, toy [(napudren li) beshe, (kakvo)]. (CSB–A)

‘And he, and José Carreras. Did you see what he looked like? He looked ... good I mean, he is very handsome, was his face powdered or what.’

4. Hesitation with *or/или*

E&BAISs that denote hesitation have their final (second or third) constituent unexpressed. This indicates that the speaker is not sure what the final alternative is or, to put it another way, the final alternative is not clear to the speaker. Nonetheless, context and logic suggest that the speaker tends to assume that the final alternative is similar to the other alternatives. This comes to say that, however paradoxical it seems and sounds, the unexpressed final constituent seeks to communicate a meaning similar to those communicated by the preceding expressed constituents.

Thus, the expressed constituents of the EAIS in ex. 15 are NPs that carry object meaning. The example is an excerpt from a conversation about the addressee’s work. In an attempt to find out what environmental engineering deals with the speaker is making similar guesses and hence is suggesting similar alternatives. Therefore, like the expressed constituents, the unexpressed one seeks to convey object meaning. From a pragmatic viewpoint, it allows the interpretation “something/anything else”.

(15) A: *Is that with regard to [(workplace engineering) (or just, you know, environment, the work place environment), (or ...)]?*

B: *Uh, well, it's actually, um, waste water taking, taking care of. Uh, I'm actually in the air division and we monitor, um ... (STCSE)*

In its turn, the BAIS in ex. 16 seeks to identify the people whom speaker K was telling off. A component of the expressed constituent (the PP *на две жени ли*) is the common noun *жени* (*women*) which denotes members of the class of persons. It seems reasonable to assume that the unexpressed constituent has a component which also refers to persons and which can be interpreted as „някой друг“ (“somebody else”). Hence, the AIS implicates „На две жени ли се карах, или на някой друг“ (“Was I telling off two women or somebody else”).

(16) A: *Ние те видяхме оня ден тукa, нещо се караше на хората.*

K: *[(На две жени ли), (или ...)] (CSB–A)*

A: *Nie te vidyahme onya den tuka, neshto se karashe na хората.*

K: *[(Na dve zheni li), (ili ...)] (CSB–A)*

A: 'We saw you the day before yesterday here, you were sort of telling off people.'

K: 'Two women or ...'

IV. Conclusions

Corpora findings lead to the following conclusions about the types of approximation expressed by E&BAISs:

1. AISs carry the meaning of approximation when the speaker does not consider it important to establish the truth value of one of the alternatives. This meaning is much more typical of the BAISs in the corpora than of their English counterparts.

2. Depending on whether their constituents have exact values or one of them has a *wh-* (or *k-*) value, the AISs fall into two groups – AISs that express approximation with exact values and AISs that express approximation with (an) exact value(s) and a *wh-* (*k-*) value, the latter group being much larger than the former. Different types of approximation are distinguished within each group.

3. Approximation with exact values can be numerical (or quantitative), temporal, situational and identification. BAISs communicate all the four types. However, only AISs that denote temporal approximation are testified in the English corpora.

4. According to the interrogative *k*-word (or *wh*-word), approximation with (an) exact value(s) and a *k-* (*wh-*) value can be approximation with *колко/whatever*, *кога*, and *какво/what*. Additionally, E&BAISs convey hesitation with *or* and *или*.

5. AISs that communicate the meaning of hesitation with *or* and *или* have their final constituent unexpressed because the final alternative is not clear to the speaker. Yet, context and logic suggest that it imparts a meaning similar to that (those) conveyed by the expressed constituent(s).

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