

ENGLISH ALTERNATIVE INTERROGATIVE STRUCTURES – CONSTITUENTS AND FUNCTIONS WITHIN THE CLAUSE

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Abstract: *The article discusses the qualitative and quantitative results from a corpus-based research into the constituents of English alternative interrogative structures (EAISs) and their grammatical functions within the clause. The study has shown that the most typical functions of the EAISs are those of direct object, adjunct and subject-oriented predicative complement. The EAISs often represent a binary unmixed coordination of noun phrases, prepositional phrases or (closed) interrogative subordinate clauses. However, there are also EAISs whose constituents belong to different syntactic categories. Still other EAISs have their final constituent unexpressed. The constituents most often occur within the boundaries of the same sentence.*

Key words: *English alternative interrogative structures, constituents, grammatical functions, direct object, adjunct, subject-oriented predicative complement*

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I. Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the constituent structure and the grammatical functions of English alternative interrogative structures (EAISs) within the clause as well as to provide statistical data based on corpora evidence. The qualitative and quantitative research has been conducted on authentic examples of alternative interrogative structures (AISs) excerpted from four corpora of written and spoken English.

- English Fiction Corpus (EFC, 90 508 word forms) compiled by V. Spasova for the purposes of her PhD thesis.

- English Corpus of Fiction Monologue (ECFM, 50 370 word forms) compiled by V. Spasova for the purposes of her PhD thesis.

- 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).

Corpora evidence shows that 126 AISs, i.e. 49.2 % out of the total of 256 AISs found in the corpora, perform functions on a clausal level. There are 23 in EFC, 12 in ECFM, 60 in CFCSE, and 31 in STCSE respectively.

In all examples henceforth the constituents of the AIS are inserted in round brackets, while the AIS is in square brackets and is marked with single underlining. The coordination marker *or* is regarded as belonging “with the coordinate that follows it” (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 1277; this view is also shared by Borsley 1996: 116) 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 parentheses, too.

II. Constituents and functions of EAISs within the clause

1. Direct object

The function of direct object turns out to be the most typical function of the AISs testified in the corpora. These AISs are 49, i.e. 38.9 % of all AISs with functions within the clause serve as direct objects. There are 7 in EFC, 3 in ECFM, 27 in CFCSE, and 12 in STCSE.

Data suggest that the most common verb to license AISs is *know* (12 occurrences), followed by *remember* and *think* (5 occurrences each), *decide*, *say*, *wonder* and *ask* (3 occurrences each), and *tell* (2 occurrences). Other verbs such as *mention*, *care*, *describe*, *buy*, and *bring* occur only once. *Know* and *remember* are always used in their negative form, *decide* occurs in both positive and negative form, the other common verbs are exploited only in their positive forms. Verbal idioms such as *have no idea* and *make up one's mind* also license AISs functioning as direct objects.

The AISs most often represent a binary unmixed coordination of clauses, namely, they are made up of two clausal constituents that “belong to the same syntactic category” (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 1326).

Usually, the clauses are finite closed interrogative subordinate, the second of which is reduced to the negator *not*. For instance, the AIS in ex. 1 can be regarded as a reduction from *if that's true about all Puerto Ricans or if that's not true about all Puerto Ricans*, while that in ex. 2 can be treated as a reduced version of *whether he waved back or whether he didn't wave back*.

(1) *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)*

(2) *But I do remember that we stood and watched him go by and waved at him. I don't remember [(whether he waved back) (or not)] so I did get to see President Roosevelt himself and in person ... (CFCSE)*

The AISs can also consist of two finite (ex. 3) or two non-finite *to*-infinitival open interrogative subordinate clauses (ex. 4).

(3) *... you always want to get your kids everything and, uh, you don't care [(how much it costs) (or what it takes)] ... (STCSE)*

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

The constituents of the AIS can be not only clauses but also phrases. For instance, the AIS in ex. 5 is a case of multiple coordination of noun phrases (NPs).

(5) *And we're trying to make a decision whether to buy [(a beach place, beach house), (or a lake house), (or a mountain house)]. (CFCSE)*

As it turns out, examples of multiple coordination are much less frequent in the corpora than those of binary coordination. Furthermore, multiple coordination is limited to three-member AISs.

Some AISs are instances of binary mixed coordination, i.e. their constituents belong to different syntactic categories (*ibid.* 2002: 1326). Thus, the AIS in ex. 6 is a binary mixed coordination of clausal constituents. It consists of one closed and one open interrogative subordinate clause. In its turn, the AIS in ex. 7 is an instance of a binary mixed coordination of a clausal and a phrasal constituent. It is made up of a finite declarative subordinate clause and an NP.

(6) *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)*

(7) *How long, I mean did the doctor just come and say [(she has got about six weeks left) (or one of those kinds of things)] did, did you know? (CFCSE)*

Finally, there are some AISs whose second constituent is unexpressed as in ex. 8 and 9 in which the first constituent is a finite closed interrogative subordinate clause and a finite declarative subordinate clause respectively.

(8) *And, umm, I don't remember [(whether it was that night), (or)], I think it was later. (CFCSE)*

(9) *Do you think [(he resents that now) (or --)]? (CFCSE)*

As we can see from the examples above, corpora AISs in the function of direct object display a rich diversity in the syntactic types of their constituents. Most often the AISs are instances of a binary unmixed coordination of clauses, usually finite closed interrogative subordinate. Other AISs represent an NP-coordination. Still other AISs are examples of binary mixed coordination. Last but not least, some AISs serving as direct objects have their second constituent unexpressed.

2. Adjunct

AISs in the function of adjunct come second in frequency in the corpora. They are 20 in total, i.e. 15.9 % of all AISs that carry out functions on a clausal level serve as adjuncts. There are 2 in EFC, 4 in ECFM, 11 in CFCSE, and 3 in STCSE.

Some AISs constitute the so-called “ungoverned exhaustive conditional construction” functioning as an adjunct (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 985–6).

(10) *He wanted to direct it, he wanted to act, to star in it, you know, he, he enjoyed the story line, and I think he just really wanted, he really wanted it. Whether it, [(whether it won all kinds of awards) (or whether it just was okay at the box office)], I think he would have been happy because I think that, I think he did a good job ... (STCSE)*

The AIS above consists of two finite full closed interrogative subordinate clauses, namely, *whether it won all kinds of awards* and *whether it just was okay at the box office*, which express “an exhaustive set of [two] possibilities” (*ibid.* 2002: 986), *viz.* the film won all kinds of awards and the film just was okay at the box office. Each possibility represents “a condition or ‘case’” (*ibid.* 2002: 985) under which the director would have been happy, i.e. he would have been happy if the film won all kinds of awards and he would have been happy if it just was okay at the box office. The AIS is “ungoverned” because there is no item that governs or licenses it. The governed version will be headed by such prepositions as *regardless of* and *irrespective of* or by the noun *matter* preceded by the determinative *no* (*ibid.* 2002: 985) so that the structure will have the form of *regardless of / irrespective of / no matter whether it won all kinds of awards or whether it just was okay at the box office*.

Interrogative subordinate clauses like those that make up the AIS in ex. 10 are also discussed by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1100) who point out that they express “an alternative conditional-concessive meaning”. The clausal coordination denotes “an alternative condition in that logically it combines the conditional meaning of *if* with the disjunctive meaning of *either ... or*” (*ibid.* 1985: 1100). As for the concessive meaning, it “emerges from the unexpected implication that the same situation applies under two contrasting conditions” (*ibid.* 1985: 1100). Following Quirk *et al.*, we can paraphrase the clausal coordination in ex. 10 as *Even if it won all kinds of awards or even if it just was okay at the box office, I think he would have been happy*.

Here is another example of the ungoverned exhaustive conditional construction. The AIS consists of two closed interrogative subordinate clauses, the second of which is reduced to the negator *not*.

(11) *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)

Corpora evidence indicates that apart from closed interrogative subordinate clauses, the constituents of AISs functioning as an adjunct can be prepositional phrases (PPs), NPs and adverb phrases (AdvPs). There are examples of both unmixed and mixed coordination. Thus, the AIS in ex. 12 is made up of two PPs, whereas those in ex. 13 and 14 consist of a PP and an AdvP.

(12) *Do you think your parents told you stories [(more out of humor) (or more out of, as a warning)]?* (CFCSE)

(13) *Do you remember in your family, any particular stories that were told, like you know [(at Thanksgiving) (or just, maybe even now)] stories that you uh, know you remember when so and so did such and such?* (CFCSE)

(14) *Do you feel like, do you think it would have been different if you had gone to school [(in Boston) (or someplace else up north)]?* (CFCSE)

Still other AISs have their final constituent unexpressed as in ex. 15 in which the first two constituents are NPs.

(15) *Do you, do you work like [(half days) (or half weeks) (or ...)]* (STCSE)

AISs serving as adjuncts belong to different semantic categories, viz. reason (ex. 12), temporal location (ex. 13), spatial location (ex. 14), and frequency (ex. 15).

As is evident from these examples, the constituents of the AISs functioning as adjuncts belong to a variety of syntactic categories. They can be finite closed interrogative subordinate clauses, PPs, NPs, AdvPs. On the whole, examples of binary unmixed coordination outnumber those of binary mixed coordination.

3. Subject-oriented predicative complement

Corpora data show that 19 AISs serve as subject-oriented predicative complements. This makes 15.1 % of all AISs that perform functions within the clause. There are 3 in EFC, 1 in ECFM, 8 in CFCSE, and 7 in STCSE.

The copular verb that licenses these AISs is *be*. The AISs usually represent a coordination of NPs (ex. 16) and sometimes a coordination of adjective phrases (APs) (ex. 17).

(16) *And uh, I don't know who thought of it, I don't know if it was [(me) (or Jeff) (or Craig)] but uh, we uh, we had some cigarettes on us and we were smoking trying to be the big rebels you know and we had a lighter.* (CFCSE)

(17) *She didn't know if he was being [(honest) (or polite and just southern)].* (EFC)

In addition, there are AISs whose final constituent is unexpressed as in ex. 18 below (the expressed constituents are NPs).

(18) *Do you feel like that's [(a Southern thing) (or a NC thing), (or —)]* (CFCSE)

In general, corpora AISs in the function of subject-oriented predicative complement are most often instances of unmixed phrasal coordination. Coordination is usually binary and rarely multiple when the expressed constituents are NPs.

The AISs perform the semantic roles of identification (ex. 16) and characterization attributes (ex. 17, 18).

4. Subject

AISs functioning as a subject come fourth in frequency. They are 9 altogether, i.e. 7.1 % of all AISs with functions on a clausal level serve as a subject. There are 2 in EFC, 5 in CFCSE, and 2 in STCSE accordingly.

The AISs are usually made up of two NPs.

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

(20) *Even after you said that you learned to read the story of Trumpet the Dog, after you began to read on your own did sometimes [(your cousins) (or other people)] still read or tell stories to you even though you could read?* (CFCSE)

The subject function of the AISs in ex. 19 and 20 is beyond question. However, doubts may arise as to the subject status of the AIS in ex. 21 which occurs in a sentence with existential *there*.

(21) *OK, well um, are there [(any particular stories related to this) (or anything else you enjoy reading now) (or)] um, I mean, is there anything looking at what you experienced, is there anything, any type of stories that you like to read now or that you like to hear about now?* (CFCSE)

Here I hold the opinion that the dummy *there* is the formal syntactic subject, whereas the real semantic subject, or “the notional subject” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 185–6, 944; Borsley 1996: 202), is the AIS. I agree with Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1391) that in sentences with existential *there* the subject position is filled by *there*, while what follows the copular verb *be* can be analyzed as “a displaced subject”. A displaced subject “is an internal complement of the verb that is not syntactically a subject but corresponds semantically to the subject” (*ibid.* 2002: 1391). This in mind, we can analyze the AIS in ex. 21 as a displaced subject.

Also, let us note that the AIS under investigation is an instance first of multiple coordination, and second of an AIS with an unexpressed final constituent (the expressed constituents are NPs).

As is evident from the examples examined hitherto, the constituents of the AIS are usually juxtaposed. However, there are rare examples like 22 below in which the two coordinates are non-adjacent. Here I agree with Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1346–7) that the second coordinate can be treated as a postposed coordinate which takes a position at the end of the clause. As the first coordinate in ex. 22 serves as a subject, the postposed coordinate can be attributed the function of coordinate subject. The AIS itself can be analyzed as made up of two NPs, the second NP being reduced to just the definite article *the*.

(22) *Do you think [(the program) came first (or the ...)]* (STCSE)

Data allow us to conclude that corpora AISs serving as a subject usually represent a binary NP-coordination. In sentences with existential *there* the AISs function as a displaced subject.

5. Predicate

AISs serving as a predicate are as many as those functioning as a subject – 9, i.e. 7.1 % of all AISs with functions within the clause. There are 2 in EFC, 2 in ECFM, and 5 in CFCSE.

The AISs represent a coordination of two or three verb phrases (VPs).

(23) *He then moved on to basic questions about whether they [(had been victims of crime), (had relatives in prison) (or were related to any police officers or prosecutors)].* (EFC)

The AIS in ex. 24 can be assigned the function of both a predicate and a predicator. The reason is that its constituents can be classified both as VPs and as lexical verbs (Vs). The VPs have neither complements nor adjuncts and therefore coincide with the lexical verbs that realize the function of predicator.

(24) *And then I'll eventually get around to reading it and whether it [(stays) (or goes)] depends on what it's like!* (CFCSE)

The AISs discussed hitherto have their constituents expressed in one and the same sentence. Corpora data, however, show that there are rare instances of AISs whose constituents occur in two adjacent sentences. In such cases we can talk about inter-sentential coordination and AISs with inter-sentential constituents.

It is necessary to point out here that “the division into two sentences has an information-packaging function: it presents the whole as a sequence of two messages” (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 1735).

The AIS in ex. 25 is such an instance of inter-sentential coordination – the second constituent is set off as a separate sentence and in this way it is given further importance. As the AIS is split between two sentences, the predicate is also split.

(25) *And so is there anything in particular about growing up that you want to share that [(maybe changed you as a person)? (Or made you the person that you are)?]* (CFCSE)

Not surprisingly, corpora data indicate that AISs in the function of predicate consist of VPs that occur within the boundaries of the same sentence. The example of inter-sentential coordination above is an exception. It is important to note that AISs with inter-sentential constituents turn out to be a rare phenomenon in the corpora.

6. Locative complement

There are 7 AISs that function as a locative complement. This makes 5.6 % of all AISs that carry out functions on a clausal level. There are 2 in EFC, 1 in CFCSE, and 4 in STCSE.

Like subject-oriented predicative complements, locative complements are commonly found after the verb *be* and “cover expressions associated with the [semantic] roles of source, goal, and location” (Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 258). Thus, the AIS in ex. 26 denotes spatial location, whereas that in ex. 27 indicates temporal location.

(26) *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)

(27) *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)

As is evident from these examples, AISs serving as a locative complement are made up of phrases – two PPs in ex. 26 and two NPs in ex. 27. Binary unmixed coordination of phrasal constituents is generally observed with corpora AISs in the function of locative complement.

7. Predicator

6 AISs, i.e. 4.8 % of all AISs with functions within the clause, serve as a predicator. There are 3 in EFC, 1 in ECFM, and 2 in CFCSE.

The AISs represent a binary coordination of lexical verbs (Vs).

(28) *Even after you said that you learned to read the story of Trumpet the Dog, after you began to read on your own did sometimes your cousins or other people still [(read) (or tell)] stories to you even though you could read?* (CFCSE)

8. Part of the predicate

AISs can function not only as a predicate but also as part of the predicate. These AISs are 5 in total, i.e. 4 % of all AISs that perform functions on a clausal level. There are 2 in EFC, 1 in ECFM, 1 in CFCSE, and 1 in STCSE.

The AIS in ex. 29 represents a binary coordination of non-finite bare infinitival clauses. It serves as a complement to the head auxiliary verb *can* and together they form the VP (put in curly brackets) that functions as a predicate in the finite closed interrogative subordinate clause *whether he can export or at least set up trade*.

(29) ... *if he can raise enough, uh, coffee and bananas to, uh, where he's got something to protect other, you know, whether he {can [(export) (or at least, uh, set up trade)]}, and all then democracy of a considerable interest to him – (STCSE)*

III. Conclusions

The qualitative and quantitative corpus-based research into the constituents of EAISs and their functions within the clause has led to the following conclusions:

1. 126 AISs, i.e. 49.2 % out of the total of 256 AISs testified in the corpora, perform functions on a clausal level.

2. The most typical functions of the AISs are those of a direct object, adjunct and subject-oriented predicative complement. Much less frequently do AISs serve as a subject, predicate, locative complement, predicator, and a part of the predicate.

3. Usually, the AISs are examples of binary unmixed coordination, i.e. they are made up of two constituents that belong to the same syntactic category. Often the constituents are NPs, PPs and (closed) interrogative subordinate clauses, but they can be APs and VPs, as well. However, there are also AISs whose constituents belong to different phrasal or clausal categories. Still other AISs have their final constituent unexpressed.

4. Instances of binary coordination are much more common in the corpora than those of multiple coordination. Moreover, in the latter case AISs are made up of three constituents only.

5. The constituents of the AISs most often occur within the boundaries of the same sentence. Examples of inter-sentential coordination are rare in the corpora.

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