

## SOME MEANINGS OF ENGLISH CLAUSES WITH ALTERNATIVE INTERROGATIVE STRUCTURES

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**Abstract:** *The article presents the results of a corpus-based study of the meanings of English clauses containing alternative interrogative structures (AISs). Data show that most clauses express a request to the addressee to supply the right answer to a genuine alternative or polar question. Other clauses denote the speaker's lack of (sufficient) knowledge, unhelpful memory, wondering, uncertainty and doubt as to which of the suggested alternatives is true. Still other clauses carry alternative conditional-concessive meaning.*

**Keywords:** *AISs, alternative, meaning, knowledge, uncertainty, wondering*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to present the **variety of meanings** expressed by English clauses and sentences containing **alternative interrogative structures (AISs)**.

An AIS is an interrogative structure whose constituents are linked by the coordinator *or*. It is called *alternative* because the constituents denote different (sometimes mutually exclusive) alternatives.

The research is based on **four corpora** (two corpora of fiction works and two corpora of spoken English) with a total of 281 984 word forms.

- **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 data (the Charlotte Narrative and Conversation Collection, 198 295 word forms in total) included in the Open American National Corpus (Open ANC) available on <http://americannationalcorpus.org/OANC/index.html> [1].
- **Switchboard Telephone Corpus of Spoken English (STCSE)**, 50 476 word forms). It is part of a larger corpus of spoken data (the LDC Switchboard Corpus, 3 019 477 word forms in total) included in the Open American National Corpus (Open ANC) available on <http://americannationalcorpus.org/OANC/index.html> [1].

In all examples below the constituents of the AIS are put in round brackets, the AIS itself is in square brackets and is marked with single underlining, while the head preposition or verb on which the AIS is dependent is marked with double underlining. The coordination marker *or* is regarded as belonging with the coordinate that follows it [2, p. 1277] and on that account it is put in its round brackets. When the AIS is a constituent of a larger phrase, the latter is put in curly brackets. The abbreviated name of the corpus from which the example of AIS is taken follows the example and is enclosed in round brackets.

## II. SOME MEANINGS OF ENGLISH CLAUSES WITH AISs

### 1. Requests that the addressee should provide the right answer

Corpora data show that 134 AISs (out of the total of 256 AISs found in the four corpora) form or make part of clauses and sentences used to ask **genuine questions**. There are 7 AISs in EFC, 2 in ECFM, 93 in CFCSE, and 32 in STCSE.

A **genuine question** is a question to which the speaker **does not know the answer**. Its aim is to obtain the answer from the addressee [2, p. 866]. „The expression **the answer** is understood to mean **the right answer**. Usually the right answer is the one that is **true**.” [2, p. 866] In most cases a genuine question can be interpreted as a **request to the addressee to provide the right answer**, i.e. **the one that is true**.

Genuine questions containing AISs are usually **alternative**, sometimes **polar**, and hardly ever **open**.

An **alternative question** offers a choice between two or more alternatives expressed by the constituents of the AIS. Each alternative is a possible answer to the question [2, p. 868]. The alternatives are **mutually exclusive**. In other words, an alternative question presupposes that **only one** of the suggested alternatives is true [2, p. 898; 3, p. 823] but the speaker does not know which one it is. By asking such a question the speaker requests that the addressee should confirm the truth value of only one of the alternatives by selecting it as the right answer.

Thus, in ex. 1 it is the first alternative that has been chosen as the right answer, while in ex. 2 it is the second one.

(1) A: *Now, {your [(grandparents) (or great-grandparents)]} came from Italy?*

B: *Uh, my grandparents.* (CFCSE)

(2) A: *[(Do you have any others) /i.e. any other hobbies/ (or is it just mainly cross-stitch)]?*

B: *Um, I do mostly that, um, not very artistic really for like painting and stuff.* (STCSE)

AISs are also found in clauses and sentences used to ask **polar questions**. Unlike their alternative counterparts, however, these questions „do not necessarily exclude either alternative” [4, p. 264], i.e. the alternatives in a polar question **may not be mutually exclusive**.

A polar question has two possible answers of opposite polarity. „... one answer is derivable directly from the question itself, while the other is its polar opposite, i.e. its positive or negative counterpart.” [5, p. 163] A polar question presupposes that one of the possible answers is the right one, the one that is true. By asking such a question the speaker requests that the addressee should choose either the positive or the negative answer, thus confirming its truth value.

The addressee has selected the positive answer in ex. 3 and the negative one in ex. 4.

(3) A: *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)]?*

B: *I guess, actually it would, because in high school, I was on a State cheerleading championship squad, and they don't have squads like that up north as much, my cousins tell me from their high school. So I think it would definitely been different, just because of that.* (CFCSE)

(4) A: *Do you remember anything that, um, I mean, there are always books that I liked, I always had to read everything but uh, there were certain things that I liked more than others, do you remember anything you liked in particular, um, {about [(stuff you had to read maybe in your English class) (or um, things like that)]}?*

B: *Nothing.* (CFCSE)

## 2. Lack of (sufficient) knowledge or information

Some AISs constitute or take part in the structure of clauses and sentences that do not ask genuine questions. Yet, these clauses and sentences indicate that at the time of the utterance the speaker (or the character) lacks (sufficient) knowledge or information to assess which of the suggested alternatives is true.

The total number of these AISs is **20** – **5** in EFC, **5** in CFCSE, and **10** in STCSE.

The meaning of insufficient knowledge is most often signaled by lexical markers, the most common of which is the cognitive verb *know* always used in its negative form in the main clause containing the AIS. Fifteen out of the twenty examples contain the verb *know*.

(5) „... *One of our Christian spies in the Black Robes' headquarters here whispered that the priest Tsukku-san secretly left Osaka five days ago, but we don't know if he went [(to Yedo) (or to Nagasaki, where the Black Ship is expected)]. ...*” (EFC)

(6) *Both of the ones /i.e. the guys from Puerto Rico/ 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)]. Ones I met, have been pretty, pretty funny.* (STCSE)

(7) *Besides, they tend to offer adequate, adequate vacation, I guess, and the paid time off is wonderful, and, uh, one of the things that we were just talking about as a matter of fact this week at work was the CODA Plan that is offered, and I think that is just a fabulous one, so ... I don't know [(if you participate in that) (or not)] but ...* (STCSE)

## 3. Alternative conditional – concessive meaning

Other AISs make part of closed interrogative subordinate clauses introduced by *whether* or represent coordination of such clauses. Not infrequently such a clause or clausal coordination conveys alternative conditional – concessive meaning [3, p. 1100]. There are **19** examples altogether – **4** in EFC, **1** in ECFM, **10** in CFCSE, and **4** in STCSE.

The clause or clausal coordination denotes an alternative condition in that „it combines the conditional meaning of *if* with the disjunctive meaning of *or*” [3, p. 1100]. As for the concessive meaning, it „emerges from the unexpected implication that the same situation applies under two contrasting conditions” [3, p. 1100].

Thus, the AIS in ex. 8 allows the interpretation in ex. 9.

(8) *He wanted to direct it /i.e. the movie Dances with Wolves/, 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 and, and the self-satisfaction he got out of it is much greater than any awards that they can give him.* (STCSE)

(9) *... 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 are a few more examples:

(10) *[(Whether) (or not) (Tug would continue to need Captain McLendon)], he didn't have him much longer.* (ECFM)

(11) *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)

(12) *And one of the things that I have found, whether it's {in [(a movie) (or a book)]}, it's got to engage me psychologically on some level.* (CFCSE)

#### 4. Wondering

Still other clauses with AISs express the speaker's (or the character's) wondering which alternative is true. There is a total of **19** examples – **8** in EFC, **3** in ECFM, **1** in CFCSE, and **7** in STCSE. The examples from the fiction corpora render the character's stream of thoughts.

The meaning of wondering is usually conveyed by means of lexical markers, the most typical of which is the verb *wonder* used in the clause containing the AIS.

(13) *I sipped my tonic, wondering if he knew about me; wondering [(if Van Zandt had told him, or Trey), (or if he had been left out of that loop on purpose)].* (EFC)

(14) *I sipped my tonic, wondering if he knew about me; wondering if [(Van Zandt) had told him, (or Trey)], or if he had been left out of that loop on purpose.* (EFC)

(15) *Yes, um, I was wondering whether you were in favor of [(statehood independence) (or the status quo)] for Puerto Rico.* (STCSE)

Other lexical indicators are the verbs *debate* (ex. 16) and *think* (ex. 17) used as ideographic synonyms for *wonder*.

(16) A: *I understand, understand though it, uh, believe me, I do that myself and I disagree with you. I don't think it's the worst investment in the world.*

B: *Yeah? Do you, yeah? Do you really not? I, I, you know, I, I debate {about [(whether it's really good) (or not)]}, you know.* (STCSE)

(17) *And, uh, they just published this internally, you know, getting people involved /i.e. in the programme/, so that that's really strange. I, I was wondering why we had somebody from Maryland though I was thinking, „God, [(do we have a TI in Maryland) (or ...)]?” (STCSE)*

The AIS in ex. 17 above has the second constituent unexpressed. Context, however, suggests that the unexpressed constituent seeks to negate lexically the expressed one. In other words, if the second constituent were realized, it would be by the negator *not* so that the AIS would be *do we have a TI in Maryland or not*. Now it is easier to see that the speaker wonders whether the positive or the negative alternative is true.

The AIS in ex. 17 makes part of a **self-addressed question** [3, p. 826]. This is a question that the speaker asks to themselves. In the absence of lexical markers, a self-addressed question alone may signal the meaning of wondering:

(18) *{Had I [(been born to stutter) (or lived to be a discarded airman)] [(because Meade had repulsed Lee at Gettysburg), (or because Cromwell had had Charles beheaded)]?* (ECFM)

#### 5. Unhelpful memory

Sometimes AISs make part of clauses which show that at the time of the utterance in the present the speaker does not remember clearly a past fact in general or a fact from their past in particular which they have personally observed or experienced. In other words, the speaker's memory does not serve them correctly as a result of which they cannot judge which alternative is true.

There are **16** examples in the corpora – **1** in ECFM, **13** in CFCSE, and **2** in STCSE. Most examples come from stories retold by the speakers who were witnesses to the events described but do not remember some of the facts.

The speaker's unhelpful memory is most often signaled by lexical items, the most frequent of which is the cognitive verb *remember* always used in its negative form in the main clause containing the AIS.

(19) *But back again to the war years one time we came out of the doctor's office and I was just standing on the corner and along came Roosevelt's famous car with no roof on it. (...) 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 so that was a big thrill for me as a young person. (CFCSE)*

(20) *I read a thing, I don't even remember if it was {in [(the Dallas Site) (or the Inside one)]}, about, uh, companies allowing you and they said that TI was looking into it to purchase extra vacation days, which I thought sounded like a good idea. (STCSE)*

Another lexical indicator is the cognitive verb *know* also always used in its negative form in the main clause containing the AIS. Usually the expression *I don't know* denotes the speaker's lack of (sufficient) knowledge or information, but, in my opinion, in examples like those below, the verb *know* is used as a contextual synonym for *remember* and hence *I don't know* is to be interpreted as *I don't remember*.

(21) *Oh, we lived uh, not far from the Susquehanna River (...) and I don't know [(if it was in the year that the king died there in '77) (or if it was '78)], but a flood came and course the kids were all you know told to leave school, parents would come get you ... (CFCSE)*

(22) *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)*

## 6. Uncertainty and doubt

Another group of clauses and sentences indicates the speaker's (or the character's) uncertainty and doubt as to which of the suggested alternatives is true or whether the whole proposition containing the AIS is true.

There are 15 examples in total – 5 in EFC, 1 in ECFM, 6 in CFCSE, and 3 in STCSE.

The most typical lexical indicators of this meaning are the modal adverbs *maybe* and *probably*, the modal expression *I'm not sure* (in ex. 23 it follows the clause with the AIS), the lexical verb *doubt* (in ex. 24 it takes as complement the closed interrogative subordinate clause containing the AIS), and the parenthetical *I guess* (in ex. 25 it follows the clause with the AIS).

(23) B: ... *the social attitude has a little bit to do with, uh, I think the way we dress.*

A: *Um-hum.*

B: *That's true there's some rule that's like between Labor Day, uh, no, is it [(Labor Day) (or Memorial Day)], I'm not for sure. It's that one in September is when you need to quit. (STCSE)*

(24) *Or, he conjectured, those sentences Arctor spoke aloud could be a voice command to some electronic hardware he'd installed in the house. Turn on or turn off. Maybe even create an interference field against scanning ... such as this. But he doubted it. Doubted if it was in any way [(rational) (or purposeful) (or meaningful)], except to Arctor. (EFC)*

(25) B: *But I'm, I'm disturbed by a country that attempts to be functionally bilingual at the official level.*

A: *Oh, I see.*

B: *Um, I'm, I'm concerned {about [(whether) (or not) (that causes fractionousness)]}, I guess. (STCSE)*

Sometimes the meaning of uncertainty can be expressed by the verb *know* always used in its negative form in the main clause containing the AIS. To my mind, in both examples below *I don't know* is to be interpreted as *I'm not sure*.

(26) *We lived in uh, in dairy land country and uh, little things you missed which now I don't know [(if I like) (or not)]. (CFCSE)*

(27) *... we, we often find ourselves in situations where there are mysteries and we have to follow the clues. And I, I love, I love it when I find the answer! But, um, sometimes I guess I find mysteries that leave gaps or I don't follow them quite, I don't know whether it's [(my perspective) (or my language)]. (CFCSE)*

### 7. Inability to decide on one of the suggested alternatives

Some AISs take part in the structure of clauses and sentences indicating that at the time of the utterance in the past the character (or the speaker) was unable to choose one of the suggested alternatives. There are 6 examples – 1 in EFC, 4 in ECFM, and 1 in CFCSE.

The meaning becomes clear from the presence of the verb *decide* (ex. 28) or its synonymous expressions *make up one's mind* (ex. 29) and *make a decision* in the clause or sentence containing the AIS (ex. 29) or immediately following it (ex. 28). The verb *decide* is preceded by the modal verb *could* accompanied by the adverb of frequency *never*; the adverb *never* accompanies the verbal idiom *make up one's mind*.

(28) *Had this been [(a dream), (or a day-time vision)]? I could never satisfactorily decide, but it was brilliantly clear.* (ECFM)

(29) *I never made up my mind [(whether) (or not) (I was in love with her)].* (ECFM)

### III. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the corpus-based study of the meanings of English clauses containing AISs can be summarized as follows:

- Most clauses express a request to the addressee to supply the right answer to a genuine alternative or polar question.
- Other clauses denote the speaker's lack of (sufficient) knowledge, unhelpful memory, wondering, uncertainty and doubt as to which of the suggested alternatives is true.
- Some clauses show the speaker's inability to decide on an alternative.
- Still other clauses carry alternative conditional-concessive meaning.

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