



LUND UNIVERSITY

“What cause you were knackered?”

The reactive what-x construction in two corpora of Present-Day spoken English

Pöldvere, Nele; Paradis, Carita

2018

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Pöldvere, N., & Paradis, C. (2018). “What cause you were knackered?”: The reactive what-x construction in two corpora of Present-Day spoken English. Abstract from The 5th International Conference of the International Society for the Linguistics of English, London, United Kingdom.

Total number of authors:

2

Creative Commons License:

Unspecified

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

“What cause you were knackered?” The reactive *what-x* construction in two corpora of Present-Day spoken English

Nele Pöldvere and Carita Paradis
Lund University

nele.poldvere@englund.lu.se; carita.paradis@englund.lu.se

Many studies have investigated lexico-grammatical items that have undergone change in Present-Day spoken English (e.g. Leech et al. 2009; Bowie et al. 2013; McEnery et al. 2017), but most of them have been concerned with time spans of up to 20–25 years. With the compilation of the London-Lund Corpus 2, we are, for the first time and in a truly comparable way, able to track changes in spoken English over the past 50 years. This study focuses on one of these changes, the rise of the reactive *what-x* construction.

- (1) A: thank God you added in Judith she'd been so upset
B: *what with her photograph not being [credited]*
A: [well no] no no no no no¹

What in (1) is not a typical interrogative pronoun but a syntactically “aberrant” and prosodically integrated construction with an attitudinal function, enhanced by the falling intonational contour at the end of the tone unit. B does not only elicit information from A but does it in a way that makes the speaker’s negative attitude explicitly known. This study is couched in the framework of Construction Grammar (Fried & Östman 2005; Goldberg 2006). By systematically studying the usage constraints of the reactive *what-x* construction and its functions in dialogues, we show that the construction is a novel one in contemporary English and has acquired, and continues to acquire, other functions in addition to the interrogative one.

The data come from two comparable corpora of spoken British English consisting of half a million words each, the London-Lund Corpus (LLC-1) and the London-Lund Corpus 2 (LLC-2). LLC-1 contains data from the 1950s–1980s, and LLC-2 from 2015–2018. In this study, we focus on private face-to-face conversations, and an equal number of such texts were drawn from each corpus. All instances of *what* were first automatically extracted and then manually checked for cases where *what* was utterance-initial and prosodically integrated with the rest of the utterance, which could be phrasal or clausal. These constructions were analysed with respect to a number of formal and functional parameters, such as syntactic structure, speech act and addressee uptake, to determine how those are cognitively and interactionally organised. The results of the analyses in LLC-1 and LLC-2 were then compared with respect to the occurrences of the different uses.

The analysis revealed that there are two major uses of the reactive *what-x* construction: question proper and intersubjective use. The questions proper roughly correspond to Stenström’s (1984) primary question acts and incorporate question types that vary in terms of syntactic structure and discourse orientation. They were found in both corpora. The intersubjective use, however, was only found in LLC-2, which suggests the development of a new function. We propose that, in dialogic discourse contexts, the reactive *what-x* construction has developed from primarily framing questions into primarily expressing speaker attitude with a backgrounded interrogative function, as illustrated in (1) above.

¹ Square brackets represent overlaps.

References

- Bowie, Jill, Wallis, Sean & Aarts, Bas. 2013. The perfect in spoken British English. In Aarts, Bas, Close, Joanne, Leech, Geoffrey & Wallis, Sean (eds.), *The verb phrase in English: Investigating recent language change with corpora*, 318–352. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fried, Mirjam & Östman, Jan-Ola. 2005. Construction Grammar and spoken language: The case of pragmatic particles. *Journal of Pragmatics* 37. 1752–1778.
- Goldberg, Adele. 2006. *Constructions at work: The nature of generalization in language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leech, Geoffrey, Hundt, Marianne, Mair, Christian & Smith, Nicholas. 2009. *Change in contemporary English: A grammatical study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McEnery, Tony, Love, Robbie & Brezina, Vaclav. (eds.). 2017. Compiling and analysing the Spoken British National Corpus 2014. Special issue of *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 22(3).
- Stenström, Anna-Brita. 1984. *Questions and responses in English conversation*. Lund: Lund University Press.