


Helping respondents to format their answers: a question wording experiment in a telephone survey

Yfke Ongena
University of Groningen

Sanne Unger
Lynn University



- 
- Let me tell you a story
 - You won't believe what happened
 - Guess what happened
-
- > Projecting a Discourse Unit (Houtkoop & Mazeland 1985)
 - > Conversation analysis

Interaction in a survey interview

I: Would you say your health is excellent, good, fair or poor?

R: It's pretty well

I: And which comes closest: excellent, good, fair or poor?

R: It is fair.

How mismatch answers also can be “solved”

I: Would you say your health is excellent, good, fair or poor?

R: It's pretty well

I: OK

(interviewer enters 'good')

Cause of mismatch answers: Question structure?

Component name:	Example:
Question Delivery	How often do you do X?
Action projection	I will now ask some questions...
Question Specificationby X we mean...
Response alternatives	Always, sometimes or never?

(adapted from Houtkoop-Steenstra 2002)

Problematic Question structure (1)

*Question delivery
component*



Would you say your health is excellent, good, fair or poor?

Problematic Question structure (2)

*Question delivery
component*

How much of a problem do you consider pain in your bones or joints; a big problem, some problem, or no problem at all.

'Seemingly open-ended question' (Holbrook et al. 2007)

→ Question delivery should be last utterance

Putting alternatives *before/within* the QDC

*Question delivery
component*

Please tell me whether you consider each of the following
to be **a big problem, some problem, or no problem at all:**
pain in your bones or joints

*Question delivery
component*

'Projecting' alternatives after the QDC

*Question delivery
component*



Which of the **following categories** best describes how much
of a problem you consider pain in your bones or joints; a
big problem, some problem, or no problem at all

'Delayed processing question' (Holbrook et al. 2007)

Question wording as a cause of mismatch answers

Hypothesis 1:

Delayed Processing Questions will yield fewer mismatch answers than **Seemingly Open-ended Questions**.

Response alternatives as a cause of mismatch answers

- What words do people use in ordinary conversations?
- Experiment Dutch Health Survey (Ongena & Dijkstra, 2010)
 - 6% mismatch answers when colloquial alternatives (Yes/No),
 - 27% when formal alternatives (Agree/Disagree)

Response alternatives as a cause of mismatch answers

Hypothesis 2:

Colloquial alternatives will yield fewer mismatch answers than **Formal alternatives**.

Split ballot experiment in existing survey

- NASIS 2006 (CATI, n =1800)
- Manipulated set of questions in second half of interview
- 300 recorded interviews
- Data coded in Sequence Viewer (kappa = 0.92)

Manipulation of question wording

DPQ	SOEQ
<p>Which of the following categories would best describe Alzheimer's disease?</p>	<p>What would be the best way to describe Alzheimer's disease?</p>
<p>1. Mental illness 2. Neurological disorder 3. Natural effect of aging 4. Viral infection</p>	

Effects of question wording

DPQ	SOEQ
Which of the following categories would best describe Alzheimer's disease?	What would be the best way to describe Alzheimer's disease?
26% mismatch answers (n = 161)	30% mismatch answers (n = 136)
χ^2 (df=1)= .60, p = n.s.	

Manipulation of Response alternatives

Colloquial alternatives	Formal alternatives
<i>For each of the following statements you can answer with:</i>	
Yes Maybe No	Agree Neutral Disagree
1. I worry that I personally develop Alzheimer's 2. I worry that a family member might develop Alzheimer's 3. Alzheimer's is a disease that concerns everyone	

Effects of Response alternatives

Colloquial alternatives	Formal alternatives
Yes Maybe No	Agree Neutral Disagree
3% mismatch answers (n= 582 QA sequences)	16% mismatch answers (n = 315 QA sequences)
χ^2 (df=1) 48.091, p < .001	

Effects of Response alternatives and respondent characteristics

	B	Exp (B)
Alternatives (Formal)	1.83 **	6.23
Education (years)	-0.23 **	0.79
Age (years)	-0.01	1.00
Sex (male)	-0.09	0.91
Constant	-0.08	
	n = 878 QA sequences	

** p < 0.01

Conclusions

- No clear effects of DPQs versus SOEQs
- Difficulty of using existing survey
- Effects of alternatives replicated; **yes/no** better than **agree/disagree**
- Conversation analysis: a research field that should not be neglected
 - Turn-taking, epistemics, sequential organization, preference organization, repair, action formation, etc.

Thank you!

- More information: y.p.ongena@rug.nl