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

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• Let me tell you a story
• You won’t believe what happened
• Guess what happened

> Projecting a Discourse Unit  (Houtkoop & Mazeland 1985)

> Conversation analysis
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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component name:</th>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question Delivery</td>
<td>How often do you do X?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action projection</td>
<td>I will now ask some questions…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question Specification</td>
<td>….by X we mean…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response alternatives</td>
<td>Always, sometimes or never?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(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

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
‘Projecting’ alternatives after the QDC

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DPQ</th>
<th>SOEQ</th>
</tr>
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<td>Which of the following categories would best describe Alzheimer’s disease?</td>
<td>What would be the best way to describe Alzheimer’s disease?</td>
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1. Mental illness
2. Neurological disorder
3. Natural effect of aging
4. Viral infection
## Effects of question wording

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<td>Which of the following categories would best describe Alzheimer’s disease?</td>
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<tr>
<td>26% mismatch answers (n = 161)</td>
<td>30% mismatch answers (n = 136)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \chi^2 (df=1)= .60, p = n.s. \]
## Manipulation of Response alternatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colloquial alternatives</th>
<th>Formal alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For each of the following statements you can answer with:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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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

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- **3% mismatch answers** (n= 582 QA sequences)
- **16% mismatch answers** (n = 315 QA sequences)

\[ \chi^2 (df=1) 48.091, \ p < .001 \]
Effects of Response alternatives and respondent characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Exp (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives (Formal)</td>
<td>1.83**</td>
<td>6.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (years)</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (male)</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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