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)

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)
Which of the following categories would best describe Alzheimer’s disease?

1. Mental illness
2. Neurological disorder
3. Natural effect of aging
4. Viral infection

What would be the best way to describe Alzheimer’s disease?
Effects of question wording

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DPQ</th>
<th>SOEQ</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26% mismatch answers (n = 161)</td>
<td>30% mismatch answers (n = 136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 (df=1)= .60, p = n.s. )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Manipulation of Response alternatives

For each of the following statements you can answer with:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colloquial alternatives</th>
<th>Formal alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<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!

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