

Constructions with multiple wh-words across languages

Proposal for a workshop at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (SLE 2026), to be held in Osnabrück, 26–29 August 2026.

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Summary

Constructions containing multiple wh-words pose an intriguing theoretical challenge. These structures exhibit remarkable cross-linguistic diversity, manifesting as reduplication, repetition, or combinations of different wh-words, and often developing into idiomatic expressions with language-specific properties.

The workshop examines how these constructions vary across languages in both form and function. They serve diverse purposes including interrogatives, quasi-relatives, indefinites, emphasis, and concessive meanings, with interpretations ranging from distributive to free-choice readings.

By integrating insights from typology, semantics, construction grammar, and discourse analysis, the workshop aims to uncover the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features governing these constructions. Key areas of investigation include their grammatical status, degrees of lexicalization and idiomatization, grammaticalization paths, and the factors constraining their use and interpretation across languages.

Keywords: semantics, pragmatics, syntax, typology, information structure

Meeting Description:

The workshop aims to bring together researchers interested in the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of **constructions with multiple wh-words** across languages, which are understood as constructions structured with two or more wh-elements that can fulfil different functions, and which are typically distributive rather than collective (cf. Moravcsik 1978; Haspelmath 1997: 180). In English these constructions are represented by interrogatives, such as *Who did what?* or *I don't know who went where*. Constructional patterns with multiple wh-words in different languages have been extensively studied, especially from a syntactic perspective, e.g. Rudin (1988), Grewendorf (2001), Aoun & Li (2003), Grebenyova (2006), Gruet-Skrabalova (2011), Tomaszewicz (2011). Overall, these studies show that multiple wh-word constructions vary significantly across languages. While previous research has extensively examined **constructions with multiple wh-words** from a syntactic perspective, their semantic and pragmatic dimensions – particularly in lesser-studied languages – remain

underexplored. This workshop seeks to bridge this gap by integrating insights from typology, semantics, construction grammar and discourse analysis.

Constructions with multiple wh-words appear in a striking variety of formal and functional guises across languages: wh-word reduplication, repetition, and combinations of different wh-words, which can cover a range of functions, including (indirect) questions, (quasi-)relatives, indefinites, and others, and express a variety of meanings. For instance, **reduplication** may signal emphasis or exhaustive listing. In colloquial Mandarin, the form *shéi shéi* ‘who-who’ conveys the meaning ‘all those who / which ones’ and is typically used in the spoken register to inquire about a group rather than a single individual.

- (1) Mand. colloq. *shéi shéi yào qù?*
who-who want, intend to go
‘Who (all) wants to go?’

In Yiddish, however, wh-reduplication sometimes marks rhetorical questions or inferential statements.

- (2) Yid. *vos-vos, nor araynzogn hot er gekent.*
what-what only.PTCL tell-off.INF have.PRS.3SG 3SG.M know.PTCP.PST
‘Well, all he could do was scold someone.’

In Russian, wh-reduplication with adversative markers conveys concessive or contrastive meanings (cf. Apresjan & Iomdin 2022):

- (3) Rus. *kto-kto a on ne podvedët*
who-who but he not let-down.3SG.FUT
‘Other people might but he won’t let (us) down.’

Comparable patterns are attested in other languages as well, though in somewhat different forms – for example, cf. Pol. wh-PRO *jak* wh-PRO, *ale* (Dobaczewski, Sobotka & Żurowski 2018):

- (4) Pol. *Kto Jak kto, ale pan nie może sobie na to pozwolić.*
who As who but you.NOM.SG not can.PRS.3SG oneself on this afford.INF
‘Of all people, you cannot afford to do that.’

The wh-reduplication can be partial and can take on a non-specific, indefinite generalized (5) or free-choice (6) interpretations.

- (5) Fin. *Matti kertoi minkä mitäkin matkoiltaan.*
Matti tell.PST.3SG what.GEN what.PART travel.PL.ABL.POSS
‘Matti told all sorts of this and that from his travels.’

- (6) BCMS *Egipat je zemlja u kojoj zaista možete*
 Egypt be.PRS.3SG country in which really can.PRS.2PL
štošta vidjeti.
 what-what see.INF
 'Egypt is a country in which you can really see a lot (lit. something).'

Another type of wh-constructions are **combinations of different wh-pronouns**, which can occur, for instance, in distributive questions, direct (7) or indirect (8).

- (7) Sp. *¿Quién dijo qué?*
 who say.PST.3SG what
 'Who said what?'

- (8) Bel. *Ja mnahix vedaju i baču xto jak buduže.*
 1SG many.ACC know.PRS.1SG and see.PRS.1SG who how build.PRS.3SG
 'I know many people and I see how each one builds.'

The linear order of wh-pronouns may vary even between closely related languages, as seen in Belarusian (8) vs BCMS (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian) (9).

- (9) BCMS *Mnoge znam i gledam kako (t)ko*
 many.ACC know.PRS.1SG and see.PRS.1SG how who.NOM
gradi.
 build.PRS.3SG
 'I know many people and I see how each one builds.'

Combinations of different wh-words can also appear in quasi-relative constructions, as illustrated in the following Polish (10) and German (11) examples:

- (10) Pol. *Przynieśli, co kto mógł.*
 bring.PST.3PL what who can.PST.3SG
 'They brought whatever they could.'

- (11) Ger. *Wer wen sieht, der soll es melden.*
 who.NOM who.ACC see.PRS.3SG that shall 3SG.N report.INF
 'Whoever sees whom should report it.'

In some languages, these constructions are highly idiomatic and exhibit language-specific semantic and pragmatic properties. For example, in Slavic languages, apart from interrogative and relative, combinations of different wh-words have other functions. They can be fully lexicalized, as in Ukrainian **indefinites** *dexto, dejaki* 'some people, lit. where who, where what kind of' or BCMS **free choice** *gdjekoji* 'an occasional one, lit. where which'.

They can develop into syntactic phrasemes with restricted collocational properties and lexicalized interpretations, such as Russian *kto kuda* ‘different people went in different directions, lit. who where’ or *komu kak* ‘different people have different opinions/tastes, lit. to whom how’ (cf. Apresjan & Kopotev 2022). Such constructions are attested in many Slavic and Finno-Ugric languages, Turkish, Hindi, as well as in Baltic languages, cf. (12) and (13):

(12) Fin. *Kaikki piiloutuivat nopeasti kuka mihinkin.*
 all hide.3PL.PST quickly who.NOM what.ILL
 ‘Everyone hid quickly, each to their own place’

(13) Lith. *Berniukai išlakstė kas kur.*
 boys.NOM.PL out-run-ITER-PST.3PL who.NOM where
 ‘The guys scattered in all directions.’

Although considerably less frequent, these constructions may contain more than two wh-words:

(14) Rus. *V portu pokupali rybu doski prjanosti v*
 in port.LOC buy.PST.PL fish.ACC boards.ACC spices.ACC to
London, Egipet, Indiju komu kuda čego.
 London.ACC Egypt.ACC India.ACC who.DAT to-where what.GEN
 ‘In the port they bought fish, boards, spices to London, Egypt, India — in short, who where what’

We propose the following questions for discussion:

- What semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic factors underlie the restrictions on wh-variables and their possible pairings in multiple wh-word constructions, especially in their distributive readings?
- Under what semantic and pragmatic conditions are such constructions licensed in discourse, and what communicative functions do they perform across languages?
- What syntactic positions can these constructions occupy within the clause, and how do they interact with the valency requirements of the predicate (if present)?
- How do frequency, idiomatization and formulaicity influence the grammatical status of these constructions across different languages?
- What are the historical sources of such constructions (e.g. indirect questions > quasi-relatives > distributives), and what grammaticalization paths can be identified cross-linguistically?
- Can we detect areal or genealogical patterns in the distribution and structure of these constructions, and what do such patterns reveal about contact-induced change versus independent development?
- How do multiple wh-word distributive constructions compare with other distributive strategies (lexical, morphological, or clausal) cross-linguistically?

Call for Papers:

We welcome submissions that employ a range of theoretical frameworks, including but not limited to Construction Grammar, formal semantic and pragmatic analyses, corpus-based studies, cross-linguistic typological comparisons. We are particularly interested in studies that combine theoretical analysis with empirical data from diverse languages, using methodologies such as corpus linguistics, experimental pragmatics and comparative linguistics.

If you wish to participate in this workshop, please send your abstract of max. 300 words (including examples and excluding references) to the following email address (ktokudachego@gmail.com) by **November 5th 2025**.

Key dates for workshop proposals and abstracts

- 5 Nov 2025 – Deadline for submitting the 300-word abstracts
- 15 Dec 2025 – Decision on acceptance/rejection of workshop proposals by the SLE committee
- 15 Jan 2026 – Deadline for submitting all abstracts (including workshop papers) via EasyChair
- 31 Mar 2026 – Notification of acceptance/rejection of abstracts

Details: [SLE 2026 Conference Website](#)

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