Constructions with multiple *wh*-words across languages

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Convenors
Valentina Apresyan (Dartmouth College, USA), valentina.apresjan@gmail.com
Mihail Kopotev (University of Helsinki, Finland / Stockholm University, Sweden), mihail.kopotev@gmail.com
Piotr Sobotka (Institute of Slavic Studies, PAS, Poland), piotr.sobotka@ispan.edu.pl
Mladen Uhlik (Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language & University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), mladen.uhlik@gmail.com

Web Site: https://blogs.helsinki.fi/wh-words-cle2026/

Contact mail: ktokudachego@gmail.com

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, often developing into idiomatic expressions or even lexemes 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   man.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** *buduje.*
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):

(10) Pol. *Przynieśli*, **co kto** *mógł.*

bring.PST.3PL what who can.PST.3SG

'They brought whatever they could'.

Wh-words can combine in several ways: they appear in interrogative constructions, such as the Ger. *was* 'what' and *wer* 'who' in indirect questions (11a), or they form multiple constructions containing both relative and indefinite pronouns (11b).

(11a) Ger. *Ich weiß, was wer gesagt hat.*
1.SG.NOM know.1SG.PRS what who.NOM say.PTCP have.3SG
'I know who said what.'

(11b) Ger. *Wer   was   sagt,   habt   Konsequenzen   zu   tragen.*
who.NOM   what.ACC   say.3SG.PRS   have.3SG   consequence.PL   to   bear.INF
'Whoever says something has to bear the consequences.'

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 **indefinite**s *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 — 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?

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