

## ***Wh*-less degree questions**

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### **1. Introduction**

As described in Endresen (1985) and Bull (1987) Norwegian dialects in Trøndelag and North Norway have a way of forming degree questions without the use of a *wh*-expression and without the syntax that normally accompanies *wh*-questions. Taken at face value the construction takes the form of regular yes/no-questions. Consider the pair in (1) showing a Standard Norwegian degree question (1a) compared to the Trøndelag/North Norwegian construction (1b).

(1) a. Hvor gammel er du? (Bokmål Norwegian)

*how old are you*

‘How old are you?’

b. E du gammel? (Trøndelag/North Norwegian)

*are you old*

‘How old are you?’

Disregarding intonation, example (1b) is strictly speaking ambiguous between the reading given by the translation and that of a yes/no-question, i.e. ‘Are you old?’. However, in the dialects in question there is at least a very strong tendency that the stress pattern is different in the two cases. As described in Endresen (1985) and Svenonius and Kennedy (2007), in a yes/no-question there will be an intonational peak on the most embedded constituent whereas the intonational peak will typically come further to the left in a *wh*-less degree question: on the string in (1b) the difference would come about as a difference in intonational peak on the adjective *gammel* (yes/no-question) versus on the fronted verb (degree question).

### **2. Results**

#### *2.1 Nordic Syntax Database (NSD)*

Endresen (1985) mentions positive evidence for the existence of the construction in dialects from Møre og Romsdal and Sør-Trøndelag counties and northwards. Likewise he reports that consultants south of this area say they are unfamiliar with the construction. As we will see shortly, data from the Nordic Syntax Database match Endresen’s estimate to a high degree.

In ScanDiaSyn the construction was tested by two sentences in Norway and one of them was also included in the Swedish version of the questionnaire. The two sentences are the following – only the first one was tested in both Norway and Sweden/Finland.

(2) ER du gammel? (#989) (Norwegian)

*are you old*

'How old are you?'

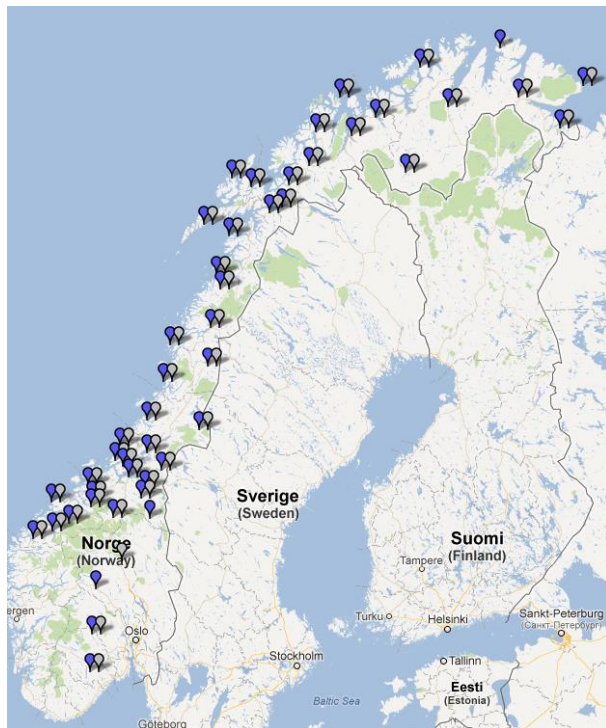
(3) LESTE du mange bøker? (#991) (Norwegian)

*read you many books*

'How many books did you read?'

The latter of the two test sentences was included in order to check if the construction is sensitive to a distinction between gradable adjectives and quantified nominals.

Map 1 shows the high score results for the two test sentences, with blue markers for (2) and grey markers for (3), and we can make two initial observations. First, there are no high score results in the Swedish speaking area whatsoever. Second, there is a considerable overlap in the judgment of the two sentences: There are only three places at which (2) but not (3) gets a high score and only one place where it is the other way around. Closer examination of these unbalanced measure points reveals that at two of them (Røros and Kjøllefjord), sentence (3) gets a medium score, whereas the other two (Kvam and Vestre Slidre) are located south of a rather clear isogloss (see below).



Map 1: High scores for the wh-less degree questions #989 (blue) and #991 (*Leste du mange bøker? 'Did you read many books?'*) (grey) in NSD.

Map 2 shows high scores (white markers) and low scores (black markers) for just example (2) (#989), and the map makes it very clear that this construction is dismissed altogether in Swedish dialects. Furthermore, we now also see a clear isogloss for the construction in Norway which cuts across the country south of Sør-Trøndelag and Møre og Romsdal counties, i.e. confirming the geographic expanse indicated by Endresen (1985). At two measure points on the very southern border of the districts north of the suggested isogloss, we have a medium score for both sentences, more specifically at Herøy in Sunnmøre and Oppdal in Sør-Trøndelag.



Map 2: *Wh-less degree question in NSD.*

(#989: *Er du gammel?* 'How old are you?')

(White = high score; grey = medium; black = low score) in NSD.

There are nevertheless some high and medium score measure points also to the south of the isogloss (in Norway): three positive and three medium scores for example (2) and three positive and two medium scores for example (3). The overlap in these cases is however meager: There are only two places south of the isogloss where we find a non-negative mean result for both of sentences, namely Tinn and Nissedal in Telemark. The rest of the positive and medium scores are distributed over different locations for the two sentences.

The scattered positive judgments south of the isogloss may find its explanation in different ways. It may be the case that we do find islands of the constructions outside the core area, but the positive judgments may also be due to misinterpretations in the interview setting. A methodological challenge

when eliciting judgments for this construction is that the word order *per se* is not ungrammatical: both sentence (2) and (3) are grammatical as yes/no-questions in all Norwegian dialects, at least disregarding intonation. The fact that there is hardly any overlap in acceptance of the two sentences south of the isogloss may be taken in favor of the latter explanation.

## 2.2 Nordic Dialect Corpus (NDC)

Searching for *wh*-less degree questions in the Nordic Dialect Corpus is somewhat tricky, but eight clear-cut examples could be found by the following search string (among a majority of irrelevant hits): {Segment initial finite verb + adjective or determiner (quantifier) (up to four positions later) + question mark (up to four positions later)}. A less restrictive search could have yielded additional hits, but probably not very many.

All of the eight clear-cut examples are from North Norway (7) and Trøndelag (1) – two of them follow here:

- (4) Fikk du manngen i Kjinngkållvattne i år?  
*got you many in Kinnkollvatnet in year*  
 'How many did you get in Kinnkollvatnet this year?' (botnhamn\_03)
- (5) Spællt du lænng dær a?  
*played you long there Then*  
 'How long did you play there, then?' (trondheim\_01um)

It is worth noticing that in all of the area where *wh*-less degree questions are accepted we also find degree questions *with* a *wh*-word. A search for such sentences in Trøndelag and North Norway resulted in 23 hits. In other words, it seems that *wh*-less degree questions may be a lesser used option in the dialects in question. The informants were not asked for their preferences, however, during the questionnaire sessions.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1 Dialect variation

Bull (1987) is largely a commentary on Endresen (1987) in which she on the one hand confirms the existence of *wh*-less degree questions in Northern Norwegian dialects and on the other hand points out some differences between the Trøndelag dialects (which is the main focus for Endresen) and the Northern Norwegian dialects. One of the more substantial differences is the following.

First, Bull points out that the functional noun *pass* 'pace, step' in Northern Norwegian unlike Trøndelag dialects require the presence of an overt *wh*-word. Hence, the Trøndelag example in (6a) given by Endresen is only viable as in (6b) as given by Bull (orthography slightly altered here).

- (6) a. Va'de pass mange såm kamm?  
*were it pace many SOM came*  
 'Roughly how many came?'
- b. Kor pass mange va de Så kamm?  
*how pace many was it SOM came*  
 'Roughly how many came?'

Bull (op. cit.) also discusses certain issues pertaining to general phonological and pragmatic differences between the two main dialect types that it will lead to far to review here.

### 3.2. Other data and theoretical issues

Endresen (1985: 255ff) discusses the extent to which *wh*-less degree questions may be embedded, and he points out that degree questions embedded under matrix predicates in non-interrogative questions must have an overt degree *wh*-word. However, if the matrix clause as such has interrogative illocutionary force, the embedded degree question may be *wh*-less. As Endresen points out, this corresponds to whether the *wh*-phrases is extracted or not in the standard language, and we get contrasts such as the one between (7) and (8) where (7a) and (8a) are (orthographically adjusted) dialect examples from Endresen and (7b) and (8b) Nynorsk Norwegian examples.

- (7) a. Trur du a e gammel?  
*think you she is old*  
 'How old do you think she is?'
- b. Kor gammal trur du ho er?  
*how old think you she is*  
 'How old do you think she is?'
- (8) a. Dæm visst it ke langt de va.  
*they knew not how far it was*  
 'They didn't know how far it was.'
- b. Dei visste ikkje kor langt det var.  
*they knew not how far it was*  
 'They didn't know how far it was.'

Endresen furthermore provides data which suggest that if the matrix clause is a yes/no-question, it may license absence of the *wh*-word in the embedded degree clause. Thus, both (9a) with and (9b) without a *wh*-degree word are possible in the specific Trøndelag dialect that he focuses on (Selbu).

- (9) a. Vet du ker gammel A e?  
*know you how old She is*  
 'Do you know how old she is?'
- b. Vet du om a e Nå gammel?  
*know you if she is Some old*  
 'Do you know how old she is?'

Svenonius and Kennedy (2006) draw a direct parallel between the *wh*-less degree question in Norwegian dialects and Icelandic degree questions of the kind in (10).

- (10) Hvað ertu gamall?  
*what are-you old*  
 'How old are you?'

The Icelandic construction has the overt *wh*-item *hvað*, and Svenonius and Kennedy argue that in the *wh*-less Norwegian construction, there is a silent *wh*-operator corresponding to the overt Icelandic item, and that in both cases this *wh*-operator moves out of the degree phrase to the first position of the matrix clause. Hence, their syntactic analysis is roughly as given in (11).

- (11) a.  $Op_i e du [t_i [gammel]]?$   
 b.  $Hvað_i ertu [t_i [gamall]]?$

An important aspect of this analysis is that it clearly separates *wh*-less degree questions from the superficially similar yes/no-questions and instead serves to treat the construction on a par with degree questions in general: by most standard analyses of yes/no-questions there would be no *wh*-operator moving to the initial position from some more embedded position.

We will not review Svenonius and Kennedy's analysis further here, but certain questions do arise. First of all, embeddings such the one in (9b) raises the question why the construction in fact may take the form of an indirect, embedded yes/no question. And furthermore we may ask why we do not encounter cases of overt *wh*-split in other North Germanic varieties than Icelandic.

### 3.3 Historical development

Little is known regarding the historical development of *wh*-less degree questions in Norwegian dialects, but Endresen (1985) argues that it must be rather new construction. The fact that it is not shared across Norwegian and Swedish dialects may also point in this direction.

Endresen (1985) furthermore argues that the optionality one may observe in the Trøndelag dialects between degree questions with and without an overt *wh*-word is due to interference from the standard language: He argues that the *wh*-less construction is the true dialect construction and that the alternative with an overt *wh*-item is a borrowing from the standard language.

It is difficult to assess the last point of view. As we have noted in section 3.3, degree questions with an overt *wh*-item is the only option in certain cases, and overtly marked *wh*-phrases thus necessarily do exist in the dialects in question. Furthermore, as noted in section 2.2 there are more instances of standard degree questions (with an overt *wh*-item) than the *wh*-less ones in the corpus data, and if Endresen is right in his claim, that suggests that the construction is on its way out of the dialects. In turn, that is not suggested by the questionnaire data: informants from Trøndelag and Northern Norway do recognize and accept the construction as part of their dialect.

### References

- Bull, Tove. 1987. Eit nordlig syntaktisk drag i norsk. *Maal og Minne* 1-2/3-4: 137–141.
- Endresen, Øyalf. 1985. *E a mang, klokka?* *Maal og Minne* 3-4: 249–262.
- Svenonius, Peter and Chris Kennedy. 2006. Northern Norwegian Degree Questions and the Syntax of Measurement, in Mara Frascarelli (ed.) *Phases of Interpretation*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 129-157.

#### Web sites:

Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals>

Nordic Dialect Corpus: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>

Nordic Syntax Database: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>