

Some Characteristics of Communication Verb Ask in Newspaper Discourse

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Abstract

This paper deals with communication verb ask in newspaper discourse. Analysing examples from our corpus we wanted to show linguistic characteristic of the verb ask in this type of written discourse. The analysis shows that the verb is used in more or less similar structures as elsewhere. However, the colligation patterns it occurs in are something of a novelty and typical of this type of discourse.

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Introduction

Communication, although a specialized type of activity, is an important semantic domain in its own right. Speakers of English distinguish among many types of communicative activities, and commonly report what someone has said or written using verbs such as *ask, call, say, speak, talk, tell, write* (Biber 2007: 365). In descriptive grammars these verbs are known as communication verbs. Biber (2007: 362) defines them as a special subcategory of activity verbs that involve communication activities. The aim of this paper is to show some characteristics of communication verb ask used in newspaper articles on Brexit. The study was conducted on the examples of 472 words out of million which translates to 0.047 percent.

The verb *ask* has the meaning of requesting somebody to do or say something or to tell somebody about something. (Carter 2007: 52)

Although the basic pattern of its complementation is transitive (1) or ditransitive (2) (ask someone to do something) communication verb *ask* may also be intransitive as in the example found in our corpus (3):

(1) *John Bercow, the Commons speaker, said 66 backbenchers asked questions.*

(2) *"A BBC interviewer asks you a question you are unable to answer.*

(3) *It's a question that Martin Moore, director of the centre for the study of communication, media and power at King's College London has been asking too.*

It is not rare to combine the communication verb *ask* with a reflexive pronoun. The purpose of using a reflexive pronoun is to point out that the object of a verb is the same person as the subject of the verb:

It offers "a chance to step back and ask ourselves what kind of country we want to be".

The verb *ask* used in direct speech tends to have subject verb inversion:

"Can you imagine the inter-departmental conversation between them?" asked one moderate Tory MP.

The verb *ask* used in newspaper share the characteristics of verbs *ask* used elsewhere. One of the characteristics of verb *ask* is that it may occur in the following structural patterns with a to- infinitive clause:

verb + to-infinitive clause:

Overall, *Brexit* took second place in importance to the budget among respondents – some of the 100 people asked to keep track of their thoughts on leaving the EU as part of a project by Britain Thinks with the Guardian

verb + NP + to-infinitive clause:

We asked leave and remain voters to sum up their emotions after the UK formally entered negotiations to leave the EU.

be + verb-ed + to-infinitive clause:

We owe it in the name of decency to issue a promise that none of the EU citizens living here when we leave will be asked to go and we must do this now.

verb + for NP + to-infinitive clause:

The EU is asking for money to cover spending commitments the UK has already made, as well as Brexit-related costs, including the pensions of staff dealing with the UK's departure.

verb+ NP+ wh-clause+ to-infinitive clause

A driver asks a passerby how to get to Dublin.

The communication verb *ask* may have a wh-clause as a direct object:

Labour's Ian Murray asks what Paterson means by "shedloads."

There are also examples in which the verb *ask* has a that-clause as a direct object. In combination with that-clause the verb *ask* has the meaning of request and requires a verb in the subjunctive mood:

I asked that she take a stand that may be remembered in time to come.

The examples excerpted from our corpus show that verb *ask* occurred with post-predicate wh-clauses introduced by *whether* and *if*. The verb *ask* combined with the *whether/if* clause functions as an indirect speech report of a yes/no question (4). However, in great number of examples the *whether/if* clause usually corresponds to an alternative direct question (5):

(4) *Emily Maitlis, who was presenting the show, asked Leadsom if she was accusing broadcasters of being unpatriotic .*

(5) *This is what Liam Fox said in the Q&A after his speech (see 2.40pm) when he was asked if he would feel comfortable eating chlorine-washed chicken*

One of the observations we made refers to the fact that communication verb *ask* in the examples found in our corpus did not occur in the protasis of a conditional utterance but almost always in apodosis:

(6) *He asked if the additional timing meant the prime minister would stick to her pledge to seek a "UK-wide approach".*

In certain numbers of examples verb *ask* occurred in the passive. The passive usually occurred in the form where the agent is expressed in a by-phrase (7):

(7) *They have been asked by a shopping centre security guard to move on two homeless men.*

and in the form where the agent is left unexpressed (8):

(8) *Those who have been asked previously to show evidence of comprehensive sickness insurance will no longer have to do so.*

Other passive constructions with *ask* show different patterns in which the verb occurred: to-infinitive (9), prepositional phrase (10), NP (11), wh-clause as a direct object (12) and with informal get (13):

(9) *Contractors bidding for work with the government are being asked to affirm that they back Brexit.*

(10) *At the start of the hustings Paul Nuttall was asked about the Ukip resignations.*

(11) *But the electorate was asked a clear question, and answered that it wished to leave the EU.*

(12) *When voters were asked what the party stood for, by far the most prevalent answers were, “don’t know”, and “nothing”.*

(13) *I got so many comments yesterday: ‘You shouldn’t be a politician because you have a silly name.’ And, ‘Why do you look so small on TV?’ I keep getting asked that.*

The examples we studied showed that the verb *ask* freely combines with adverbs like just (14) and yet (15) and manner adverbs such as politely, simply, equally, merrily, directly, and specifically (16):

(14) *Our Brexit negotiators must realise just how valuable Erasmus is to our future. Just ask anyone else on the scheme.*

(15) *Yet ask a Tory about struggling health services, inadequate housing supplies or creaking social care, and back comes the same pathetic response: we need a strong leader to negotiate the best deal with Brussels and stabilise our economy.*

(16) *I wrote and specifically asked that she attempt to vote it down, even though that looked pointless.*

In a good number of examples the verb *ask* was used in a combination with *for* with a meaning to make a request for something. This combination has the same linguistic properties as the verb *ask itself*. But, in newspaper discourse it enters the whole new set of collocations as it is shown in the table below:

ask for a face-to-face meeting	<i>The international trade secretary wrote to Tony Hall to ask for a face-to-face meeting about the coverage...</i>
ask for backing	<i>She plans to ask for Holyrood’s backing next week to seek that approval under a section 30 order of the Scotland Act.</i>
ask for concessions	<i>I am not in a frame of mind to make concessions or ask for concessions ... the UK has asked to leave the EU, not the other way round</i>
ask for a transition	<i>The key to the compromise is that the UK must ask for a transition</i>
ask for an indicative vote	<i>There are suggestions she could also table a draft section 30 order, and ask for an indicative vote supporting it, to increase pressure on her opponents</i>
ask for mere access	<i>If we leave the single market, and ask for mere “access”, we will be compromised in achieving these goals.</i>
ask for new powers	<i>The same principle applies when politicians ask for new powers...</i>
ask for proof	<i>At the moment, if a British citizen wants to bring, say, a South American partner to the UK, then we ask for proof that they meet an income threshold and can speak English.</i>
ask for safeguards	<i>Given the potential consequences, opposition peers are right to ask for safeguards for EU migrant rights...</i>

Conclusion

The communication verb *ask* is widely used in newspaper discourse. It enters more or less similar linguistic structures which could be found elsewhere in grammars. However, it enters the whole new set of collocations that are typical of analysed discourse and shown in this paper.

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