

What for properties are odd?*

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1 Purpose of the paper

1.1 Theoretical context

- well-established unpronounced elements in the syntax:
 - operators
 - movement traces
 - zero morphemes (e.g plural etc)
 - elliptical phrases (dependent on an antecedent)
- less well-established unpronounced elements in the syntax:
 - silent verbs (cf. van Riemsdijk (2002))
 - silent nouns (cf. Kayne (2002), Kayne (2003))

The present paper is a case study making use of silent nominals.

It is intended to add to the empirical ground from which shall sprout an understanding of the role that silent roots play in UG.

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1.2 Empirical context

The *what for* construction in Germanic:

- (1) **Was für ein Buch** hast du gelesen? (German)
what for a book have you read
What (kind of) book did you read?

- ['what' 'for' '(a)' '(sort)' '(a)' NP]

- the sequence is available and grammatical in:

Danish, Dutch¹, German, Norwegian², Swedish³, Swiss German, Yiddish etc.

Literature on *what for* includes: den Besten (1981), Lie (1982), Bennis (1983), den Besten (1985), Corver (1991), Børjars (1992), Bennis (1995), Pafel (1996), Bennis et al. (1998), Leu (2003)

- The *what for* construction has been shown to exhibit diverse oddities.
(sections 2.3.1 – 2.4.1 – 2.5.1 – 2.6.1)
- The present paper attempts to show that allowing silent nominal roots makes these oddities disappear.
(sections 2.3.2 – 2.4.2 – 2.5.2 – 2.6.2)
- Thus the *what for* construction seems to be a good probe into the role that silent roots play in UG.

1.3 Strategic criteria

- Every instantiation of *what for* shows us some aspects of it:
i.e. if you see a nominal root once, assume it's always there.
- The distributive context of X is indicative of the presence of an X:
i.e. if everything points to the presence of a nominal root, then assume that there is one there, even if you can't see/hear it.

¹For discussion on Dutch and examples and judgments I'm very grateful to Marcel den Dikken.

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³For discussion on Swedish and examples and judgments I'm very grateful to Annalena Wiklund and Kersti Børjars.

2 Analysis of *what for*

2.1 Overt manifestations of another nominal root

The best evidence for the existence of a nominal root is the overt occurrence of it.

2.1.1 Swedish and Norwegian

In Norwegian and Swedish *what for* phrases often contain an additional nominal that follows *for*.⁴

- (2) Hva har du lest **for slags bok**? (Norwegian)
what have you read for *slags* book
What kind of book did you read?
- (3) Vad för **slags/sorts** bil ... (Swedish)
what for *slags/sorts* car ...
What kind of car ...

2.1.2 Dutch

The extra nominal *slag* is also available in Dutch.

- (4) Wat voor **slag** jongen/jongens ... (Dutch)
What for *slag* boy/boys ...
What kind of a boy / boys ...

A careful statement:

There is space (i.e. a legitimate environment) for a nominal root in *what for*, somewhere between *for* and the open class nominal.

⁴There is also the variant lacking an overt *for*:

- (1) Hva **slags bok** har du lest? (Norwegian)
What *slags* book have you read

I will ignore this for present purposes.

2.2 A common denominator

- The key idea is that one of the obligatory ingredients is a **(possibly silent) nominal root**, in addition to the open class noun.
- There is a limited number of possible nominals that occupy this slot (*slags*, *sorts*, *slag*, *SORT*, *SLAG*, and *KIND*)⁵. Thus it seems to be a closed class category. I will refer to them as "classifiers".

The ingredients of a *what for* phrase are:

- (5)

what	for	(a)	classifier _N	(a)	NP _{openclass}
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2.3 Case oddity

2.3.1 Case-inert *für*?

Received wisdom: *für* is Case-inert.

- (6) a. Das habe ich **für meinen**_{ACC} Vater gekauft. (German)
that have I for my father bought
I bought this for my father.
- (7) a. Was für **ein**_{NOM} Mann kommt da?
what for a man comes there
Who's that coming there? / What kinda guy is that coming there?
- b. **Mit** was für **einem**_{DAT} Hund hast du gespielt?
with what for a dog have you played
What kind of dog did you play with?

A more careful way of putting it:

In *what for*, *für* and the (open class) nominal following it are not in a Case-relation.

2.3.2 *für* is well-behaved

für case-licenses the (silent) classifier.

- (8) Mit was **für KIND einem**_{DAT} Hund hast du gespielt?
With what for *KIND* a dog have you played?
With what kind of dog did you play?

⁵Capital letters stand for lexically silent roots, i.e. the letters that symbolize them in the present paper could just as well be replaced by code numbers.

2.4 *een* oddity

2.4.1 Spurious *een*?

- the indefinite article normally precedes:

indefinite singular count nouns

- Dutch *een* can precede plural nouns in *wat voor*^{6, 7}

(9) Wat voor (**een**) jongens ... (Dutch)
what for (a) boys ...

A careful statement:

In (9) *een* is not in an "article-noun" relation with *jongens*.

2.4.2 *een* is well-behaved

een in (9) is in an article-noun relation with the silent classifier noun, illustrated in (10):

(10) Wat voor **een** SORT jongens
what for a *sort* boys

2.5 Optional oddity

2.5.1 An optional indefinite article?

An expected indefinite article can go missing.

This gives the impression of optionality of the indefinite article in *what for* (in some varieties).

(11) Vad köpte du för (en) bil? (Swedish)
What bought you for (a) car?

A careful statement:

There are instances of *what for* in which the open class nominal can be a bare NP.

⁶This spurious article also occurs in other complex nominal constructions and in addition to plurals precedes proper names and mass nouns. See Bennis et al. (1998) for discussion and an analysis of this spurious article as a small clause copula.

A full account of the "spurious article" would have to take other occurrences into account. I have a feeling that an account along the lines of the present paper could be extended to these. However this remains to be done.

⁷There is also a "spurious article" in Scandinavian, so for instance *ena* in Swedish *vad för*, which occurs with plural [+human] nouns.

2.5.2 No optionality

- no optionality of indefinite articles
- but choice of classifier nominal:

(12)	<i>for</i>	Article/F	SORT	Ø NP
	<i>for</i>	Ø	SLAG	Ø NP
	<i>for</i>	Ø	KIND	article NP

- (13) a. Vad köpte du för KIND en bil?
b. Vad köpte du för SLAG bil?

2.6 Adjectival Suffix on *für*

2.6.1 A prepositional adjective?

Adjectival suffix *ig* in Swiss German:

- follows nominal and verbal roots
- never follows prepositions outside of *what for*

But we get *fürig* in *what for*:⁸

- (14) Was für-igä wi hesch kauft? (Swiss)
what for-ADJ wine have-you bought?
What kind of wine did you buy?

A careful statement:

In (14) *ig* does not overtly follow the kind of root it usually follows outside of *what for*.

⁸There are the variants *fürig*, *fürtig*, and *fürnig* that coexist.

2.6.2 No: a *sertigs* adjective instead

- *ig* follows the silent *SORT*, a nominal root (15a).
- An appropriate answer to (15a) features the overt manifestation of the classifier in Swiss German (15b).⁹

- (15) a. Was für **-SORT-ig**-ä wi wotsch? (Swiss)
What for -ADJ wine would-like-you?
What kind of wine would you like?
- b. Ich wott **sertigä** wi da.
I would-like such wine here
I'd like such a wine here.

2.7 Interpretive differences

The choice of classifier seems to correlate with interpretive preferences, as we would expect.

2.7.1 Sets and types

Classifiers differ with respect to the readings they allow:

- set versus type distinction in Dutch (cf. Bennis (1995), Bennis et al. (1998)) and Swiss German.

- (16) **nice boys / ?? Max and Moritz**
- a. Was für-SORT-igi Buäbä chämet? (Swiss)
What for-ADJ boys are coming?
- b. Wat voor een SORT jongens zijn dat? (Dutch)
What for a SORT boys are that?
- (17) **nice boys / Max and Moritz**
- a. Was für KIND Buäbä chämet? (Swiss)
What for KIND boys come?
- b. Wat voor KIND jongens zijn dat? (Dutch)
What for KIND boys are that?

⁹There are the variants *serig*, *settig*, *sernig* etc. that coexist.

2.7.2 Idiomaticity of the open class nominal

- *KIND*, *SLAG* allow an idiomatic interpretation:¹⁰

(18) Swiss

- Was bisch du für KIND en Esel?
what are you for KIND a donkey?
You're such an idiot!
- Das isch so KIND en Esel.
this is such KIND a donkey.
He's such an idiot!

(19) Swedish

- (?) Vad för SLAG rävar är det där?
what for SLAG foxes are that there?
They seem unreliable.

- *SORT*, *sorts*, *slags* seem to foster a literal interpretation of the nominal open-class slot in Swiss German and Swedish:

(20) Swiss

- Was bisch du für-SORT-igä Esel?
what are you for-ADJ donkey?
What kind of donkey are you?
- Das isch ä sertigä Esel.
this is a such-ADJ donkey.
This is such a kind of donkey.

(21) Swedish

- Vad för slags/sorts rävar är det där?
What for *slags/sorts* foxes are that there?
What kind of foxes are those there?

¹⁰Another factor involved is splitting. For some speakers (both of Swiss German and of Dutch) an idiomatic reading is fully available only in the split variant.

- Was bisch du für en Esel! (Swiss)
what are you for an idiot!
 - Was für en Esel bisch du?
what for a donkey are you? (meaning sub-species)

3 Summary

- there are instances of *what for* with an overt nominal classifier across languages
- conjecture: there is always a nominal classifier present in *what for*
- assuming this, a number of disturbing *what for* puzzles can be solved:
 - case-inert *für* (2.3)
 - spurious *een* (2.4)
 - optionality of *en* (2.5)
 - adjectival *fürig* (2.6)

4 Conclusion

A cross-Germanic look at *what for* strongly suggests an analysis featuring silent nominal roots.

Such an analysis assimilates the alleged oddities of the *what for* construction to ordinary properties of ordinary noun phrases.

This adds to the evidence that there are silent lexical roots in the syntax.

what for is one interesting domain to look at for the question of what role silent roots may and/or should play in syntactic theory.

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