Wh-words, non-Interrogative Use of

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***Wh*-words, non-interrogative uses of**

Wh-words (i.e., question words) such as 誰 *shéi* 'who', 甚麼 *shénme* 'what' do not only have interrogative readings, they also have non-interrogative readings (Chao 1968, Lü 1980). Aside from an indefinite interpretation, they can also have a universal interpretation or a free-choice interpretation. Which interpretation the *wh*-words have depends on a couple of factors: the environment in which they appear and the type of *wh*-words they are.

Indefinite interpretation
Wh-words are typically interpreted as indefinites in *yes-no* questions and conditionals, and also when the *wh*-words are under the scope of negation, as illustrated in (1a-c) (Huang 1982, Cheng 1991). (These are also contexts where negative polarity items are licensed cross-linguistically.)

(1) a.　他們有沒有買甚麼?　　(yes-no question)
　　　　tāmén　yǒu-méiyǒu　　mǎi　shénme
　　　　3PL　　have-not.have　buy　what
　　　　'Did they buy anything?'
　　 b.　他們沒有看到誰.　　　(negation)
　　　　tāmén　méiyǒu　kàn-dào　　　shéi
　　　　3PL　　not.have　look-SUCCESS who
　　　　'They didn't see anyone.'
　　 c.　如果有誰買那本書...　(conditional)
　　　　rúguǒ　yǒu　　　shéi　mǎi　nà-běn　shū …
　　　　if　　　there.BE　who　buy　that-CL　book
　　　　'If anyone bought that book, …'

In (1a-c), the *wh*-words have a non-interrogative, indefinite interpretation (i.e., 'someone/something', 'anyone/anything'). In (1b), an interrogative interpretation (e.g., 'Who didn't they see?') is also possible, though it has different prosodic properties than the one with an indefinite interpretation.
　　Li (1992) notes that aside from the typical negative polarity environments, there are other environments in which the indefinite interpretation of *wh*-words is licensed, in particular, in contexts where the truth value of the proposition is not asserted, as in (2a,b) (see also Lin 1998).

(2) a.　我以為你喜歡誰.
　　　　wǒ　yǐwéi　　　　nǐ　xǐhuān　shéi
　　　　I　　think.wrongly you like　　who
　　　　'I thought that you liked someone.'
　　 b.　他好像喜歡甚麼.
　　　　tā　　hǎoxiàng　xǐhuān　shénme
　　　　3SG　seems　　like　　　what
　　　　'S/he seems to like something.'

Universal interpretation

Aside from the possibility of being interpreted as indefinites, *wh*-words can also be interpreted as universals, i.e., expressing 'every' or 'all'.

(3) a.　他甚麼*(都)買了給我.
　　　tā　shénme dōu　mǎi-le　gěi　wǒ
　　　3SG what　all　buy-PERF give　me
　　　'S/he bought everything for me.'
　　b.　誰 *(都) 進來了.
　　　shéi　dōu　jìn-lái-le
　　　who　all　enter-come-PERF
　　　'Everyone has come in.'

As illustrated in (3a,b), the universal interpretation depends on the presence of *dōu*. As shown in (4), when the *wh*-word does not precede *dōu*, it cannot be interpreted as a universal. (4) can also have the interrogative interpretation of 'What did he buy for me in all occasions?' where *dōu* 'all' is not linked with the *wh*-word.

(4) *他都買了甚麼給我.
　　*tā　dōu　mǎi-le　shénme gěi　wǒ
　　 3SG all　buy-PERF what　　give　me
　　 Intended: 'S/he bought everything for me.'

Free-choice interpretation
Aside from being interpreted as an indefinite or a universal, *wh*-words can also have a free-choice reading. This is the kind of reading that *any* in English gets in contexts such as "Pick any fruit from the plate", where there is a choice from within a set. Free-choice readings are illustrated in (5a,b).

(5) a.　哪個學生都可以解決這個問題.
　　　nǎ-ge　　xuéshēng dōu　kěyǐ jiějué zhè-ge　wènti
　　　which-CL student　all　can　solve this-CL　problem
　　　'Any student can solve this problem.'
　　b.　你拿甚麼書都可以.
　　　nǐ ná　shénme shū　dōu kěyǐ
　　　you take　what　book all　can
　　　'You can take any book.'

The free-choice reading appears at first sight to be similar to a universal interpretation (in the case of (5a)) or an indefinite interpretation (in (5b)). This is due to the fact that free choice items are similar to indefinites in exhibiting variability in interpretation (e.g., in being associated with a universal or an indefinite) as illustrated in the English examples in (6a,b). *Any* NP in (6a) is not given a universal interpretation, since the command can be followed with pressing just one key. On the other hand, (6b) seems to point to a universal interpretation because the interpretation here is close to 'all students can solve this problem' (see Vendler 1962, Horn 2000, and Giannakidou 2001).

(6) a.　Press any key to continue.
　　b.　Any student can solve this problem.

A core characteristic which distinguishes free choice items from negative polarity items involves episodicity. A sentence is episodic when it is about exactly one event that happens at a particular time (Giannakidou 1997, Krifka et al 1995). Free choice items are unacceptable in episodic sentences (Giannakidou 2001). This is illustrated in (7a), which contrasts with the non-episodic sentence in (6b).

(7) a. *Any student solved this problem.
    b. They didn't buy anything.

Any in (7a) cannot be licensed as a free choice item because it is in an episodic sentence; and it cannot be licensed as a negative polarity item in this sentence either because it is not in the scope of a licenser (e.g., negation). In (7b) however, it can be licensed as a negative polarity item since it is in the scope of a negation.

Giannakidou and Cheng (2006) and Cheng and Giannakidou (in press) show that bare *wh*-phrases in Mandarin can be either polarity items (as in the case of the indefinite interpretation of *wh*-words) or free choice items (as the case of *shénme* in (5b)), and it is thus difficult to tear apart these two types of items when we use bare *wh*-words. In other words, bare *wh*-phrases in Mandarin are similar to *any* in English in being able to be both negative polarity items and free choice items. On the other hand, *nǎ*-CL NP 'which NP' in Mandarin are free choice items only, as can be seen from the fact that they cannot appear in episodic sentences (8a,b). (Note that *nǎr* or *nálǐ* 'where' patterns with bare *wh*-phrases; see below for similar cases in Cantonese.)

(8) a. *哪個學生都進來了.
        nǎ-ge   xuéshēng dōu   jìn-lái-le
        which-CL student   all   enter-come-PERF
        Intended: '*Any student came in.'
    b. *他買了哪本書嗎?
        tā   mǎi-le   nǎ-běn   shū   ma
        3SG   buy-PERF which-CL book Q_PART
        Intended: 'Did s/he buy any book?'

Contrast (8a,b) with (9a,b), where *nǎ*-CL NP 'which NP' appears in non-episodic sentences:

(9) a. 哪個學生都可以進來.
        nǎ-ge   xuéshēng dōu   kěyǐ   jìn-lái
        which-CL student   all   can   enter-come
        'Any student can come in.'
    b. 他不想買哪本書.
        tā   bù xiǎng mǎi   nǎ-běn   shū
        3SG not want buy   which-CL book
        'S/he doesn't want to buy any book.'

The difference between (9a) and (9b) is not a difference between a universal free-choice and an indefinite free-choice reading. Cheng and Giannakidou (in press) argue that free-choice with *dōu* is on a par with a definite free-choice (as in Greek) while free-choice without *dōu* is an indefinite free-choice.

Differences among wh-*words*

We have seen above that bare *wh*-words (i.e., not *wh*-phrases such as *nǎ*-CL NP 'which NP') have variability in terms of interpretation. They can be interrogative, indefinite, universal, and free choice (see also Huang 1982). Cheng (1991) and Li (1992) argue that *wh*-elements are like typical indefinites (Heim 1982) in that they are variables without quantificational force. Their interpretation is thus dependent on quantificational binders in the sentence (e.g., an existential or universal quantifier in a sentence). Thus, 哪裡 *nálǐ* 'where', 怎麼 *zěnme* 'how', and 為什麼 *wèishénme* 'why', aside from their interrogative reading, can also be interpreted as *somewhere/anywhere, someway/anyway, some reason/any reason* respectively, as long as they appear in the environments which license such readings.

Nǎ-CL NP phrases differ from bare *wh*-words in that they are free choice items only. The difference between bare *wh*-words and *nǎ*-CL NPs can be characterized as a difference between indefinites and definites respectively, with the latter being comparable to *which* NP phrases in English (see Rullmann and Beck 1998, and Beck and Rullmann 1999).

It should be noted that in Cantonese, *wh*-words, although their morphological composition appears to be more on a par with *nǎ*-CL NP in Mandarin, nonetheless share similar variability in interpretation with simple *wh*-words:

(10) a. 佢有冇見到邊個.
        keoi^5 jau^5 mou^5 gin^3-dou^6 bin^1-go^3
        3SG have not.have look-SUCCESS which-CL
        'Did s/he see anyone?'
     b. 佢冇買乜嘢.
        keoi^5 mou^5 maai^5 mat^{1}je^5
        3SG not.have buy what
        'S/he didn't buy anything.'
     c. 如果你想去邊度, …
        jyu^{4}gwo^2 nei^5 seong^2 heoi^3 bin^1-dou^6
        if you want go which-place
        'If you want to go anywhere, …'

As seen in (10a,c), the *wh*-words corresponding to *who* and *where* are 邊個 *bin^1-go^3* 'which-CL' and 邊度 *bin^1-dou^6* 'which-place', respectively. In these cases, they are interpreted as indefinites. The composition of these *wh*-words has close affinity with *which*-NPs, as can be seen in (11).

(11) a. 你買咗邊本書.
        nei^5 maai^5-zo^2 bin^1-bun^2 syu^1
        you buy-PERF which-CL book
        'Which book did you buy?'
     b. 邊個學生都可以入來.
        bin^1-go^3 hok^{6}saang^1 dou^1 ho^{2}ji^5 jap^6-lei^4
        which-CL student all can enter-come
        'Any student can go.'
     c. *邊個學生都入咗來.
        bin^1-go^3 hok^{6}saang^1 dou^1 jap^6-zo^2-lei^4
        which-CL student all enter-PERF-come

Intended: '*Any student could come in.'

(11a) shows that the Cantonese equivalent of 哪本書 *nǎ-běn shū* 'which book' is 邊本書 *bin¹-bun² syu¹*. As the contrast between (11b) and (11c) illustrates, the distribution of non-interrogative *bin¹*-CL NP in Cantonese is on a par with *nǎ*-CL NP 'which-CL NP' in Mandarin: it cannot appear in episodic contexts.

The data in (10) illustrate that despite of the fact that Cantonese 邊個 *bin¹-go³* 'who' and 邊度 *bin¹-dou⁶* 'where' consists of the morpheme 邊 *bin¹,* which we can gloss as 'which', they do not behave like what we may call *wh*-definites such as *nǎ*-CL-NPs or *bin¹*-CL-NPs; rather, they behave on a par with *wh*-indefinites in Mandarin such as 誰 *shéi* 'who' and 甚麼 *shénme* 'what'; in Mandarin *nǎr* or *nálǐ* 'where' also patterns with *wh*-indefinites despite the morpheme *nǎ*. The data from Cantonese and Mandarin illustrate that the *wh*-paradigm is split when it comes to variability of interpretation and quantification. Research in other Chinese dialects will provide us with a better picture of the range of variation as well as the role that a morpheme comparable to *nǎ* and *bin¹* can play in the *wh*-paradigm.

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