

## Lin (1998): *Wh*-indefinites in Mandarin Chinese

### 1 Key points

Lin (1998) discusses the distribution of *wh*-words as indefinites in Mandarin, which he calls “Existential Polarity *Wh*-words” (EPW).

One might think that the EPW *wh*-indefinite is a negative polarity item. However: “There are many contexts where [CHINESE] EPWs are licensed but where [ENGLISH] polarity *any* is disallowed.” (Section 3 of paper, skipped here.)

- (1) **Non-Entailment-of-Existence Condition on EPWs (NEEC):**  
The use of an EPW is felicitous iff the proposition in which the EPW appears does not entail existence of a referent satisfying the description of the EPW.
- (2) **Having “existential import” = wide scope indef:**  
I bought a car.  $\Rightarrow$  there is a car (in the relevant context/situation).
- (3) **Lacking “existential import” = narrow scope:**  
I didn’t buy a car.  $\nRightarrow$  there is a car (in the relevant context/situation).
- (4) **Contexts where indefinites lack existential import:**

a. Did you buy a car?	(Yes-no question)
b. Possibly he bought a car.	(Uncertainty modality)
c. If you have a car, ...	(Conditional)
d. I will/must/should buy you a car.	(Modal verb)
e. I thought he bought a car.	(Counterfactual verb)

**Is it clear how this generalization covers the (un)availability of EPW in the following?**

It’s noted in the conclusion that this condition is similar to something that has been proposed for free choice *any*:

- (5) If a sentence entails the material existence of the referent of an NP, *any* is not allowed in that NP position. (Carlson (1981, p. 11))

“If this hypothesis is correct, it will be plausible to regard Chinese EPWs as the weakest type of NPIs in natural language in that they only need to satisfy the non-entail-ment-of-existence condition.” (p. 250)

## 2 Licensing contexts

“The range of environments that sanction EPWs is quite wide, including negation, questions, if-clauses, modality environments, some verb complements, some consequent clauses, imperatives, etc. Despite such a range of environments, it seems possible to classify them into three groups, which seem to decrease in their strength for polarity licensing.” (p. 220)

### 2.1 Group A: Negation, Questions, and *If*-clauses

#### (6) Negation:

Wo mei mai (\*ge) *shenme* (dongxi)  
I not buy (\*Cl) what (thing)

‘I didn’t buy anything.’

The *wh* must be in the scope of the negation.

#### (7) *If*-clause:

Yaoshi {*shei/shenme* ren} qifu ni, ...  
if {who/what person} bully you

‘If somebody bullies you, ...’

Also with a number of other types of conditionals, not just “*yaoshi*.”

#### (8) *Ma* polar question:

*Shei* you qifu ni le ma?  
who again bully you Asp Q

‘Did somebody bully you again?’

#### (9) A-not-A polar question:

Ni ren-bu-renshi (\*ge) *shenme* da renwu?  
you know-not-known (\*Cl) what big person

‘Do you know any famous person or not?’

“A-not-A questions only license EPWs c-commanded (at S-structure) by the A-not-A operators.”

Note that *wh*-questions crucially do *not* license EPWs:

(10) **Wh-questions do not license EPWs:** (Huang, 1982, p. 243)

*Shei mai-le sheme (ne)?*  
who buy-ASP what  $Q_{WH}$   
'Who bought what?'

However, if there is an independent licensing operator, a lower *wh* can be an indefinite:

(11) **Wh-indefinite licensed by negation, in a wh-question:** (Cheng, 1991, p. 127)

*Shei mei-you mai sheme (ne)?*  
who not-have buy what  $Q_{WH}$   
a. 'Who didn't buy what?'  
b. 'Who didn't buy anything?'

- For Group A, it's stated that numeral classifiers *cannot* be added to the *wh*-word.

## 2.2 Group B: Epistemic modality environments

(12) **Modal embedding or maybe adverb:**

*Keneng/xiangbi shei you qifu ta le*  
possibly/presumably who again bully him Asp  
'Possibly/presumably, somebody bullied him again.'

(13) **Psych verb with subjunctive-y embedding:**

[Wo] kongpa ta you *shenme* hua yao shuo  
(I) afraid he have what word want say  
'I am afraid that he has something to say.'

(Weird "bare conditional"-like example skipped here.)

(14) **Nonfactive epistemic verbs:**

*Zhangsan yiwei/renwei wo mai-le shenme*, (keshi wo genben mei mai renhe  
Zhangsan think/think I buy-ASP what (but I at-all not buy any  
dongxi)  
thing)

'Zhangsan thinks that I bought something, (but I didn't buy anything at all).'

"Epistemic because they express the speaker's knowledge/belief of or commitment to the truth of a proposition."

(In Group B, "a classifier may (sometimes) increase naturalness, but this is not essential.")

## 2.3 Group C: some sort of “future” environments

(Re: Group C, “These seem to be the cases where a classifier like *ge* is generally required in order for an EPW to be properly licensed. (Again, this is not an inviolable rule.)”)

### (15) Future modals:

Yinggai/bixu/de      zhao \*(ge) {*shei/shenme* ren} lai      bang ni  
should/must/have to find (\*Cl) {who/what man} come help you

‘I/you should/must/have to find somebody to help you.’

### (16) Imperatives:

Guo-lai chi \*(dian) *shenme* ba!  
Come eat (\*Cl) what IMP

‘Come over to eat something.’ (Li, 1992)

### (17) Desires and plans:

Wo xiang chi \*(dian) *shenme* (dongxi).  
I want eat (\*Cl) what (thing).

‘I want to eat something.’

### (18) Consequents of conditionals:<sup>1</sup>

Ni yaoshi bu-fangxin de-hua, jiu jiao/zhao \*(ge) *shei* pei      ta  
you if not-relax if then ask/find (\*Cl) who accompany him  
yiqi      qu  
together go

‘If you are anxious, ask somebody to accompany him.’

## 2.4 Some negative data

### (19) Positive declaratives:

\* Wo xihuan {*shei, shenme* ren}  
I like {who, what person}

‘I like somebody.’

### (20) Factive complements:

\* Wo houhui/aonao zuo *shenme* (shiqing)  
I regret/upset do what (thing)

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<sup>1</sup>This example feels a lot like what’s called a “modal existential *wh*-construction.” See Šimík (2013) for references.

'I regret/am upset about having done something.'

(21) **Reason clauses:**

\* Yinwei *shei* mei jiao zuoye, suoyi laoshi hen shengqi  
because who not hand-in assignment so teacher very angry

'Because somebody did not turn in his assignment, the teacher was very angry.'

## 2.5 A puzzle regarding subjects in questions

(22) \* *Shei* mai-bu-mai zhe-ben shu?  
who buy-not-buy this-CL book

'Does somebody buy this book or doesn't somebody buy this book?'

(23) *Shei* zai jiao wo ma?  
who Prog call me Q

'Is somebody calling me?'

(23) is what we expect, assuming that the polar question semantics always takes scope over the entire clause, including the subject.

There is a strange explanation for the ungrammaticality of (22) given, having to do, essentially, with the subject *shei* having to be a specific indefinite. However, note that there are also examples in the literature which seem to be structurally parallel to (23) and yet are ungrammatical:

(24) \* *Shei* xiang chi pingguo ma?  
who want eat apple Q

'Does anyone want to eat apples?'

(Huang, 1982, p. 244)

## 2.6 A puzzle regarding intensional verbs

(25) John is seeking a unicorn.

a. John is seeking a specific unicorn  $\Rightarrow$  there is a unicorn (in the relevant context/situation).

b. John is seeking a unicorn (but is terribly misguided)  $\nRightarrow$  there is a unicorn (in the relevant context/situation).

"Since intensional verbs produce contexts where their object NPs need not have existential import, one expects EPWs to be able to appear in these contexts, given the generalization in (34). Unfortunately, this prediction is not borne out." (p. 239)

- (26) \*Wo zhen zai zhao shenme shu  
 I right-now Prog look-for what book  
 'I am looking for some book.'

**Solution 1:**

Suppose all EPW-licensors must be proposition-taking. This makes sense for negation, question-formation, etc. With intensional verbs, the complement is not a proposition.

A (possibly) similar contrast in English, due to Progovac:

- (27) Mary forgot that *anyone* visited her.  
 (28) \*Mary forgot *anything*.

“Although the ungrammaticality of examples like (26) can be explained in terms of the requirement that the trigger of an EPW must be a functor taking a proposition as its argument at LF, it is not clear why this should be the case; nor is it clear how this is related to or follows from the NEEC.” (p. 240)

**Solution 2:**

Suppose indefinites always involve an existential binder at a higher node with propositional type. That requires (at least) a VP, which will not exist inside the intensional verb.

### 3 Locality

Consider examples with double negation:

- (29) Bu shi wo mei mai shenme gei ta, ershi ta bu xihuan wo mai gei ta de dongxi  
 not be I not buy what to him but he not like I buy to him Rel thing  
 'It is not that I didn't buy anything for him, but that he does not like the thing that I bought for him.'

(29) entails that there is something that the speaker bought for him, so it seems to have existential import, but the EPW is grammatical.

Lin proposes that EPW licensing is evaluated within the “local proposition,” adopting a slightly mysterious definition of “local proposition” from Kadmon & Landman. In the case of (29), it's the *mei* negation that licensing *shenme*, regardless of the higher negation.

## 4 Notes

- Throughout, only simplex *wh*-words ('who' and 'what') or weird complex phrases constructed of simplex *wh*-words (e.g. 'what person') are used. *Which*-phrases are not used. It is, however, explicitly mentioned that adjunct *whs* are bad:

(30) \*Ta meiyou zenme xiuli nabu chezi  
he not how fix that car  
'He didn't fix that car in any/some way (manner).'

- It's not always clear from the discussion whether any particular example could also be used as a *wh*-question or not.
- As acknowledged in the conclusion, there remains the question of "why EPWs in some environments, namely the group C environment in section 2, tend to be accompanied by a classifier in order for the sentence to be well-formed." It's suggested that in Group C, "it might be that a classifier is added to bring out the narrow scope existential reading and suppress the interrogative reading."
- Looking at the general property of indefinites in contexts which license *wh*-indefinites could be a useful thing to do.

## References

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