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# Het is allemaal *wat*

Rede uitgesproken door

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*Opgedragen aan heit*

Mijnheer de rector magnificus, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

In many languages, question words not only have an interrogative interpretation, but also other interpretations. A simple example can be found in Dutch, as in (1).

- (1) a. *Wat* heb je gedaan? (Postma 1994, p. 187)  
'What have you done?'  
b. Jan heeft *wat* gedaan.  
John has what done  
'John has done something.'

In (1a), *wat* has an interrogative/question interpretation. In contrast, *wat* in (1b) has an indefinite interpretation "*something*". In Dutch, *wat* is the only question word which can be used as an indefinite noun phrase. The question word *wie*, for instance, does not behave like *wat*, as we can see from (2). (2) cannot mean 'Jan has seen someone'.

- (2) \*Jan heeft *wie* gezien.<sup>1</sup>  
Intended: 'Jan has seen someone.'

The Dutch examples illustrate two things concerning the indefinite interpretation of question words. First, it matters what kind of question word we are dealing with, as we just saw with *wie* and *wat*. Second, the position of the question word also makes a difference. As the contrast between (1a) and (1b) shows, if *wat* is moved to the beginning of the sentence, it is a good-old question word; if it stays "in-situ" (i.e., in its object position), it is interpreted as an indefinite.

Languages may differ from Dutch on both counts. First, in some languages, all question words can be used as an indefinite. Secondly, there are languages in which the position of the question word is not an issue. Consider question words in Mandarin Chinese for example. At first glance, they present a different picture from what we just saw in Dutch.

- (3) ta bu xiang chi *shenme* (Huang 1982, p. 242)  
he not want eat what  
a. 'What didn't he want to eat?'  
b. 'He didn't want to eat anything.'

The example in (3) illustrates that in Mandarin even in a question interpretation, the question word *shenme* 'what' does not move to the beginning of the sentence. As the translation in (3a) indicates, the sentence has an interrogative interpretation. In

addition to this question interpretation, (3) also has a non-interrogative interpretation, as indicated in (3b).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the “in-situ” question word can be interpreted either as an interrogative or as an indefinite. In contrast to what we saw in Dutch, the position of the question word in Mandarin does not appear to determine its interpretation.

As far as the type of question word is concerned, Mandarin allows question words other than *shenme* ‘what’ to be interpreted as an indefinite. (4) is an example showing that *shei* ‘who’ can also have an indefinite interpretation.

- (4) a. mei-you shei hui lai  
 not-have who will come  
 ‘It is not the case that anyone will come.’
- b. ta bu xiang jian shei  
 s/he not want see who  
 ‘S/he does not want to see anyone.’

Based on these two examples that we have seen, one may conclude that in Mandarin neither the position of the question word nor the type of question word matters when it comes to the indefinite use of question words.

What I will focus on today concerns the distinction between question words such as *who/what* and question phrases with *which* such as *which professor*. Question phrases such as *which professor* have received quite a lot of attention since the mid 80’s (since Pesetsky 1987). I will show that if we examine the environment in which *who/what* can appear and the environment in which *which-N(oun)* can appear, we can see that even in Chinese languages, both the position of the question word and the type of question word matter when it comes to the indefinite interpretation.

### 1. Some differences between *Which-N* vs. *who/what*

Let us first consider some differences between *which-N* vs. *who/what*.<sup>3</sup> Compare the questions in (5a) and (5b).

- (5) a. Which book did George buy?  
 b. What did George buy?

In (5a), whatever George bought was restricted to books, and moreover, there is a presupposed set of books that he chose from. Thus, (5a) asks which one of the presupposed set of books George bought. This differs from (5b): there is no presupposed set of things, let alone a presupposed set of books. This difference plays a central role in the contrast in (6), discussed in Pesetsky (1987).<sup>4</sup>

- (6) a. ??*What* did you persuade who(m) to read?  
 b. *Which book* did you persuade which man to read?

In both sentences, the question asks for person-thing pairs. In (6b) for instance, the answer could be: I persuaded Maghiel to read *The Mandarin VP*, Robert to read *Death in a tenured position*, and oom Geecke to read *An instance of the fingerpost*. (6b) is entirely felicitous whereas (6a) is not. The contrast here shows us that *which book* can be interpreted as the object of *read* even though there is an intervening question phrase *which man* as we see in (6b), but *what* cannot be interpreted as the object of *read* with an intervening *who* in (6a), leading to a marginal sentence.

*Which* and *who/what* also differ in the indefinite use. Dutch for instance does not allow an indefinite interpretation for *welk* ‘which’, as we see in (7), which cannot mean ‘Jan has read some book’.

- (7) \*Jan heeft welk boek gelezen.  
 Jan has which book read  
 ‘Jan has read some book.’

In contrast to Dutch, German, a close relative of Dutch, does not rule out an indefinite interpretation of *which* completely. As we can see in (8a), German, just like Dutch, allows *was* to be used as an indefinite. However, it differs from Dutch when it comes to the question word *which*. In response to: “Have some grapes,” one can say (8b), which is not possible in Dutch. Interestingly, when *welche* has a noun with it, as in (8c), the indefinite interpretation is not possible.

- (8) a. Ich habe was gegessen.  
 I have what eaten  
 ‘I have eaten something.’
- b. Ich habe schon welche gegessen.  
 I have already which eaten  
 ‘I have already eaten some.’
- c. \*Ich habe welches Buch gelesen.  
 I have which book read  
 ‘I have read some book.’

We have seen that the difference between *who/what* and *which* is manifested in a couple of ways. We will come back to the puzzle in German later.

## 2. Mandarin and Cantonese

Let us now turn to Chinese languages. The Mandarin examples that we saw in (3) and (4) show no distinction with respect to different question words or different position of the question words. We will now re-examine this initial observation.

In Mandarin, almost all question words can be used as indefinites (the only exceptions being *weishenme* ‘why’, and *zenme* ‘how’). However, it is not the case that the indefinite interpretation always arises with question words. In fact, question words in Mandarin can only be interpreted as indefinites within certain environments. In (3), we saw that question words in Mandarin can be indefinites under the scope of negation. In (9), we see more examples of question words used as indefinites in Mandarin. (9a) is a *yes-no* question; (9b) involves a conditional with the question word *shei* ‘who’ appearing in the antecedent clause of the conditional; (9c) involves the epistemic adverb *perhaps*. These are all environments which license the indefinite interpretation of question words in Mandarin.

- (9) a. qiaofeng mai-le shenme ma (Cheng 1991)  
Qiaofeng buy-PERF what QYN  
‘Did Qiaofeng buy anything?’
- b. ruguo ni kandao shei, qing gankuai gaosu wo (Cheng and Huang 1996)  
if you see who please quickly tell me  
‘If you see someone, please tell me quickly.’
- c. yexu ta you shenme hao de xiangfa (Lin 1998)  
perhaps he have what good DE idea  
‘Perhaps he has some good idea.’

In contrast, a simple sentence such as (10) does not allow an indefinite interpretation of the question word *shei* ‘who’. (10) only has a question interpretation. It can only mean ‘who does s/he like?’, and not ‘s/he likes someone’.

- (10) ta xihuan shei  
s/he like who  
‘Who does s/he like?’

The licensing environments for an indefinite interpretation of question words include therefore negation, *yes-no* question, conditional and epistemic adverbs.

It turns out that when we use the counterpart of *which* in Mandarin in these environments, the indefinite interpretation also arises, as we can see in (11).<sup>6</sup>

- (11) a. yaoshi you *nei-ge* tongxue qifu ni, ...  
 if have which-CL classmate bully you  
 ‘If some classmate bullies you, ...’
- b. keneng you *nei-ge* huaidan you qifu ta le  
 possibly have which-CL bad.guy again bully he PRT  
 ‘Possibly some bad guy bullied him again.’

*Nei-ge tongxue* in (11a) is in the antecedent clause of a conditional, and it can be interpreted as ‘some classmate’. *Nei-ge huaidan* in (11b) follows an epistemic adverb and it can be interpreted as ‘some bad guy’. Given these examples, we can state the following generalization: the type of question word does not matter; as long as a question word appears within the right licensing environment, it can be interpreted as an indefinite.

Data from Cantonese offer additional support for this generalization. (12a-c) are examples of question words in typical interrogative interpretations. (12a) has the question word *bingo* ‘who’; (12b) the question phrase *bingo hoksaang* ‘which student’; and (12c), the question word *bindou* ‘where’.

- (12) a. lei wan bin-go a  
 you look.for who PRT  
 ‘Who are you looking for?’
- b. lei wan bin-go hoksaang a  
 you look.for which-CL student PRT  
 ‘Which student are you looking for?’
- c. lei heoi bin-dou  
 you go where  
 ‘Where are you going?’

(13a-c) illustrate that the licensing environments for indefinite interpretation of question words that we have seen in Mandarin also works in Cantonese. In particular, we see that in (13c), the question phrase *bin-bun syu* ‘which book’ is interpreted as ‘some book’.

- (13) a. kamyat mou bin-go lei-go  
 yesterday not-have who come-ASP  
 ‘It is not the case that anyone came yesterday.’

b. ngo gamjat mou heoi bindou  
 I today not.have go where  
 'I didn't go anywhere today.'

c. jyugo lei jau bin-bun syu m jiu...  
 if you have which-CL book not want  
 'If you have book that you don't want ...'

### 3. Subject-object asymmetry

The picture that we have built up so far is that in both Cantonese and Mandarin, question words both of the *who/what* kind and of the *which-N* kind can be interpreted as indefinites, as long as they show up within the right licensing environment. I will now present data which show that the indefinite interpretation of *which-N* is actually more restricted: being in the right licensing environment is not good enough for *which-N*: the position in which it occurs also matters.

We have seen that negation and yes-no questions can serve as licensing environments for the indefinite interpretation of the question words *shei* 'who' and *shenme* 'what' in examples (3) and (4). These environments turn out to be different from other licensing environments in that they do not automatically accommodate an indefinite interpretation of *which-N*. In (14a), *nei-ge ren* 'which person' can be interpreted as *any person*; it is under the scope of negation. In (14b), *nei-ge ren* can also be interpreted as *anyone*; it is in a yes-no question. Note that these are examples in which the question phrase *nei-ge ren* appears as subjects.

(14) a. mei-you nei-ge ren gan ma ta  
 not-have which-CL person dare scold him  
 'It is not the case that any person dares to scold him.'

b. you nei-ge ren gan ma ta ma?  
 have which-CL person dare scold him QY/N  
 'Does anyone dare to scold him?'

These examples contrast with (15a,b). In (15a), *nei-dao cai* cannot mean *any dish*, despite the fact that it is in the scope of negation. Instead, it can have an interrogative interpretation, as indicated in the second translation. In (15b), which is a yes-no question, *nei-ben shu* cannot mean *any book*. In these examples, the question phrases *nei-dao cai* and *nei-ben shu* are objects.

- (15) a. ta bu xiang chi nei-dao cai  
 he not want eat which-CL dish  
 (i). #‘He doesn’t want to eat any dish.’  
 (ii) ‘Which dish doesn’t he want to eat?’
- b. \*qiaofeng mai-le nei-ben shu ma?  
 Qiaofeng buy-PERF which-CL book QY/N  
 ‘Did Qiaofeng buy any book?’

Comparing (14) and (15), we see that the licensing environments are the same, while the position of the question word in the sentence is not. Cantonese counterparts illustrate the same pattern, as we can see in (16a,b).

- (16) a. lei m soeng maai bin-bun syu  
 you not want buy which-CL book  
 (i) #‘You don’t want to buy any book.’  
 (ii) ‘Which book don’t you want to buy?’
- b. \*lei sik-zo bin-dip sung mei?  
 you eat-PERF which-CL dish not-yet  
 ‘Have you eaten any of the dishes yet?’

These examples illustrate a subject-object asymmetry under negation and in yes-no questions: in contrast to *who/what*, which are fine across the board, if *which-N* in Cantonese and Mandarin appears in subject position, it can be interpreted as an indefinite, but if it appears in object position, it cannot.

These examples show that elements that look the same in some contexts may indeed be different in other contexts. We have seen examples from Cantonese and Mandarin that show that question words of the *which-N* type pattern with *who/what*; at the same time, we also saw examples in which they do not pattern alike. In other words, even in Chinese languages, the type of question word and the type of position both matter when it comes to the indefinite interpretation. Whether the counterpart of *which* can be interpreted as an indefinite in Chinese languages depends on its position.

To give you a feel for what I mean, I’ll give you some examples from more familiar languages. In English and Dutch, indefinites may look like one class of elements, but when we look more carefully, the environments that they appear affect their interpretation. Take *some* in English as an example. Compare the sentence in (17a) with (17b).

- (17) a. *Some* linguists are in the pub.  
 b. There are *some* linguists in the pub.

As Milsark (1977) pointed out, *some linguists* in (17a) is ambiguous between an existential reading (*there are some linguists in the pub*) and a partitive reading (i.e., *some linguists, not others* are in the pub). In contrast, *some linguist* in (17b) only has the existential interpretation; it does not imply anything about the other linguists.

This can also be illustrated in Dutch. Both *sommige* and *enkele* can be used to translate *some*. So you may think that they are really one and the same thing. However, even though both *sommige* and *enkele* can be used to translate (17a) (as we see in (18a) and (18b)), only *enkele* can be used for (17b) (as shown in the contrast between (18c) and (18d)). (*Pub* has been translated with “academiegebouw” in anticipation of a certain reception in this building after five o’clock.)

- (18) a. *Sommige* taalkundigen zijn in het Academiegebouw.  
 b. *Enkele* taalkundigen zijn in het Academiegebouw.  
 c. Er zijn *enkele* taalkundigen in het Academiegebouw.  
 d. \*Er zijn *sommige* taalkundigen in het Academiegebouw.  
 (These examples are modified from de Hoop 1995.)

In other words, despite their superficial similarity, *sommige* and *enkele* are not the same. In some contexts, *sommige* and *enkele* can both appear while in other contexts only one of them can appear. We therefore have a correlation between positions and interpretations.

In sum, indefinite expressions like English *some*, Dutch *enkele* and *sommige*, as well as Cantonese and Mandarin *which-N* phrases behave differently in different environments.

The position-interpretation link may in fact offer us possible explanations to some puzzles. Consider Cantonese again, and now we will look at some details that I glossed over earlier. The Cantonese word for *which* is *bin*.

- (19)

which	classifier	noun	
<i>bin</i>	go		‘who’
<i>bin</i>	go	hoksaang	‘which student’
<i>bin</i>	bun	syu	‘which book’
<i>bin</i>		dou	‘which place’= ‘where’

As we can see in (19), *bin* can be attached to a classifier-noun combination, as in *bin-go hoksaang* ‘which student’, and *bin-bun syu* ‘which book’. When *bin* is attached to the classifier *go* without a noun, we get ‘who’. If it is attached to *dou*, we get ‘where’.<sup>8</sup>

We have seen that within the licensing environments such as negation and yes-no questions, *bingo* ‘who’ can be interpreted as an indefinite regardless of its position, but *bin-go hoksaang* ‘which student’ can only be interpreted as an indefinite if it is a subject.

Interestingly, this is similar to the German data that we saw in (8) in which *welche* without the noun can be interpreted as indefinite, but *welches Buch* cannot.

The question which arises here is why there is such an interpretational difference between *welche* and *welches Buch*, and between *bingo* and *bin-go hoksaang*. If we treat *welche* on a par with *welches Buch*, by assuming that *welche* takes a non-overt noun, we would not be any further in providing an explanation for the difference between *welche* and *welches Buch*. Similarly, if we assume that *bingo* has a non-overt noun following *go*, with *bin* in *bingo* occupying the same position as *bin* in *bin-go hoksaang*, we would also not be able to account for the interpretational contrast.

All along I have emphasized today that one and the same element may show different types of behaviour according to its position. Despite the fact that *welche* in German is the same element, whether it has a noun or not, and that *bin* in Cantonese is the same element, whether it is followed by a noun or not, the natural conclusion we reach is that *bin* in *bingo* does not occupy the same position in the structure as *bin* in *bin-go hoksaang*, and *welche* when appearing alone, does not occur in the same structural position in the noun phrase as *welche* in *welches Buch*. I won’t further spell out this hypothesis here.

#### 4. Other examples of *which* vs. *who/what* distinction

I would like to now return to the subject-object asymmetry that we saw in the context of interpretational possibilities of *which-N* in Mandarin and Cantonese: under the scope of negation, and in yes-no questions, *which-N* is possible in subject position but not possible in object position. Studies in language acquisition and aphasiology show us similar results. Hickok and Avrutin (1995) report results of a comprehension experiment with agrammatic Broca’s aphasics who were presented questions such as the ones in (20) (see also Thompson et al. 1999).

- |      |    |                                 |                          |
|------|----|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (20) | a. | Who chased the tiger?           | ( <i>Who</i> -subject)   |
|      | b. | Who did the tiger chase?        | ( <i>Who</i> -object)    |
|      | c. | Which lion chased the tiger?    | ( <i>Which</i> -subject) |
|      | d. | Which lion did the tiger chase? | ( <i>Which</i> -object)  |

The result is that the question in (20d), which involves *which lion* in object position, is much worse than the other questions: the comprehension of *which-object* questions was only at chance level and much worse than the comprehension of the other questions.

We see again that *who* differs from *which-N*. And moreover, the position of *which* matters. We see a contrast between *which lion* as subject and *which lion* as object.

The difference in comprehension of *which*-object questions in contrast with other questions in (20) has also been found in child language. Avrutin (2000) reports a comprehension study of English speaking children (ages ranging from 3;5 to 5;2) which shows that the comprehension of *which*-object questions is also at chance.

These results illustrate a similar subject-object asymmetry in that the object is more restricted (i.e. triggers worse performance). Whether the asymmetry is a result of syntactic deficits alone, or of deficits in processing resources, we have a convergence of results.

## 5. Final words

I discussed the results of the neurolinguistic and psycholinguistic research, not only because it illustrated the subject-object asymmetry that we have just seen, but also as a way to get to the last part of my oratie. The studies mentioned are results of joint work involving experts from different disciplines. Linguistics is by nature interdisciplinary, and future joint research involving linguists, neurologists, psychologists, computer scientists as well as philosophers will definitely yield fruitful results. In Leiden, we have to start with lowering the barriers between the different faculties for undergraduate education, creating the atmosphere for interdisciplinary studies and research. With the new BA/MA programs, I am certain that we can make a good start.

This is also a good time for all linguists in Leiden to collaborate in both teaching and research, making full use of the broad variety of languages studied here as well as the many different ways of doing linguistics.

Finally, I would like to thank a few people. First, I thank Noam Chomsky for his inspiration and for almost always arguing with me; I thank Ken Hale for showing me the wonders of language.

Ik wil hier graag ook een aantal mensen noemen die de overgang naar een academisch bestaan in Leiden aanzienlijk hebben vergemakkelijkt.

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op problemen waarvan ik dacht dat ze onoplosbaar waren. Ik zal je missen. Ik vind het heel erg dat we je niet in Leiden hebben kunnen houden.

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Rint, thanks for the patience. I look forward to all the future Cheng and Sybesma’s.

Ik heb gezegd.

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## Notes

- 1 A star in front of a sentence indicates that the sentence is ungrammatical.
- 2 I follow Ladusaw (1979) in assuming that negative polarity items such as *anything* are existential quantifiers.
- 3 Semantically, all *wh*-expressions are weak NP (see Karttunen 1977).
- 4 Pesetsky (1987) characterizes *which*-Ns to be D(iscourse)-linked. See also Pesetsky (2000).
- 5 The double question mark in (6a) indicates the marginal status of the question.
- 6 Li (1992) claims that *nei*-CL can occur in all indefinite Wh context except under negation. In contrast, Cheng (1991) claims that *nei*-CL can never occur as indefinites. As I will show below, the difference between Li and Cheng can be resolved.
- 7 For the use of negation as yes-no question markers, see Cheng, Huang & Tang (1996).
- 8 In Cantonese and Mandarin, words such as ‘year’ and ‘day’ do not appear with classifiers. See Sybesma (2000).

