

# Whinter 2015 *wh*-indefinites reading group<sup>1</sup>

mitcho + Hadas

## 1 Some data

In some (many) languages, *wh*-words have non-interrogative uses:

### (1) English:

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| a. <u>Relative pronoun:</u><br>the man <i>who</i> came | b. <u>Free relative head:</u><br>I'll have [ <i>what</i> you ate]. |
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### (2) Japanese modified *wh*'s:

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|---|---|
| a. <u><i>wh+ka</i> indefinite:</u><br><br><i>Dare-ka-ga ki-ta.</i><br>who-KA-NOM COME-PAST<br><br>'Someone came.' | b. <u><i>wh+mo</i> universal:</u><br><br><i>Dare-mo-ga ki-ta.</i><br>who-MO-NOM COME-PAST<br><br>'Everyone came.' |
|---|---|

In some languages, **bare *wh*-words** can function as *indefinites*:

### (3) Chuj (Mayan):

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|---|--|
| a. <u><i>Wh</i>-questions (generally) front:</u><br><br><i>Tas ix-a man-a?</i><br>what PRF-A <sub>2sg</sub> buy-TR<br><br>'What did you buy?' | b. <u>Bare <i>wh</i>-indefinite:</u><br><br><i>Ix k-apej tas.</i><br>PRF A <sub>1pl</sub> -eat what<br><br>'We ate something.' |
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### (4) Mandarin Chinese:

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| a. <u><i>Wh</i>-questions are in-situ:</u><br><br><i>Ni xihuan chi shenme?</i><br>you like eat what<br><br>'What do you like to eat?' | b. <u>Bare <i>wh</i>-indefinite:</u><br><br><i>Ta yiwei wo xihuan shenme.</i><br>he think I like what<br><br>'He thinks I like something.' (Li, 1992) |
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<sup>1</sup>Credit for the "whinter" pun goes, apparently, to Junko and Paul Hagstrom.

## 2 Literature that exists

The typological connection between interrogative words and indefinite words is well-known (Haspelmath, 1997; Bhat, 2000). From Gärtner (2009):

Let us thus begin with the indefinite/interrogative ambiguity. A survey based on Cheng 1991, Haspelmath 1997 and 2005, Bhat 2000 and 2004, and Bruening 2007 yielded the following 62 [i=i]-languages (out of a sample of roughly 150).<sup>20</sup>

- (27) [i=i]-languages  
Aghem, Assuriní, Atayal, Belorussian, Burushaski, Chinese, Diyari, Djaru, Dutch, Dyirbal, Old English, Finnish Sign Language, Galibi, German, Goajiro, Gooniyandi, Gothic, Classical Greek, Guaraní, Hmong Njua, Hopi, Jaminjung, Kaingang, Kamaiurá, Khmer, Klamath, Koasati, Korean, Lakhota, Latin, Lithuanian, Mangarayi, Mapuche, Maricopa, Martuthunira, Masalit, Mising, Mundari, Newari, Panare, Panyjima, Pashto, Passamaquoddy, Eastern Pomo, Ancash Quechua, Russian, Vedic Sanskrit, Santali, Shoshone, Siuslaw, Old Church Slavonic, Slovene, Takelma, Thai, Ukrainian, Warndarang, Wintu, Xinh Mul, Yaqui, Yidini, Yindjibarndi, Yup'ik

There seems to be two types of work in this domain:

1. **Why do some languages have *wh*-indefinites and some don't?**  
A good example is Gärtner (2009), which involves syntactic theorizing.
2. **What is the distribution and semantics of *wh*-indefinites in a particular language?**  
A good example is the rich literature on Mandarin *wh*-indefinites as a kind of polarity item requiring a licenser: Li (1992); Cheng (1994); Lin (1998).

## 3 Goal

There does not seem to be much that does both: bring cross-linguistic data together with generalizations informed by semantic theory. (Bhat (2000) does a little.)

We are interested in attempting this, and we think it would be a fun group project.

## 4 Plan

1. Read some things that exist: possibly Lin (1998); Bhat (2000); Gärtner (2009)
2. Come up with a battery of potentially relevant (fieldwork-like) questions to ask of particular *wh*-indefinite languages.
3. Present data on the distribution of *wh*-indefinites in languages we work on/speak.
4. (Hopefully) identify some generalizations.  
At a minimum, see how existing semantic theories (e.g. Lin, 1998, 2004) may or may not apply to a broad range of languages.
5. Write something.

## 5 Expectations

We hope that participants will be able to get something concrete (hopefully a group paper, and likely other interesting puzzles in their language(s) of interest) out of the reading group, but it will only work through active participation.

We envision active participants to:

- show up almost every time,
- bring original data to the table, think about it, and present it,
- contribute to writing and become a coauthor (if/when we get there).

If you just want to sit in sometimes when you can (without expecting to become a co-author), you're of course welcome.

It is best (though perhaps not entirely realistic) for active participants to commit to being so from the beginning.

## 6 Possible times

Here are some possible times we've identified:

- Tuesdays after 2:30
- Wednesdays 11:30–1:30
- Tuesdays after 2:30

...possibly others, depending on who shows up.

## References

- Bhat, Darbhe Narayana Shankara. 2000. The indefinite-interrogative puzzle. *Linguistic Typology* 4:365–400.
- Cheng, Lisa Lai-Shen. 1994. Wh-words as polarity items. *Chinese Languages and Linguistics* 2:615–640.
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- Haspelmath, Martin. 1997. *Indefinite pronouns*. Oxford.
- Li, Yen-hui Audrey. 1992. Indefinite wh in Mandarin Chinese. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* .
- Lin, Jo-Wang. 1998. On existential polarity wh-phrases in Chinese. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 219–255.
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