A comparative study of German and Chinese alternative questions

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Aim: to argue that (nominal) alternative questions (AltQ) are wh-questions (wh-Q) without actually being one.

German AltQ

The disjunctors.

(2) a. ni he kele haishi xuebi?
   AltQ reading
   you drink Cola haishi Sprite
   (that you drink Cola, that you drink Sprite)
   b. ni he kele huozhe xuebi ma?
   Y/NQ reading
   you drink Cola huozhe Sprite Q-particle
   (that you drink Cola or Sprite, that you don't drink Cola or Sprite)

Chinese AltQ

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Parallels between wh-Qs and AltQs

1. Intervention effects in wh-Qs and AltQs

   *Q(…) → FocOp [...wh-phrase / [A or B,]…]*

   Focused elements have both a focus and an ordinary semantic value
   Wh-phrases have a focus semantic value and an undefined ordinary value (Beck, 2006; Beck & Kim, 2006)

2. Scope marking structure in German

   (8) Was glaubt Ede, welchen Kurs Doris unterrichtet hat?
   what believes Ede which course Doris taught has

   a. Was glaubt Du. ob Pfrondor gewonnen oder verloren hat?
   what believes you whether Pfrondor won or lost has
   “Do you believe that Pfrondor won or that Pfrondor lost?”
   (Beck & Kim, 2006)

3. Bad under if and probably/might & good under no matter in Chinese

   (9) ta dagai xihuann Zhangsan / zhuohe ’haishi’/Lisi / ‘shel’.
   he probably/might like Zhangsan huozhe ‘haishi’ Lisi whom

   (10) buun Zhangsan ’huozhe / ’haishi’ / Lisi / ‘shel’ lai, du buyao darao wo.
   no-matter Zhangsan huozhe huozhe Lisi who come all don’t disturb I
   “No matter Zhangsan or Lisi / who comes, don’t disturb me.”

4. Island effects in wh-Qs and AltQs

   (11) Fährst du nach Griechenland, um dort zu wandern oder zu segeln? Adjunct island
   go you to Greece in-order there to hike or to sail
   “Are you going to Greece in order to hike or to sail there?” (Beck & Kim, 2006)

   (12) Braucht Stephan ein Spray, das Mücken oder Fliegen töten kann? Complex NP island
   need Stephan a Spray the mosquito or the fly kill can
   “Does Stephan need a spray that can kill the mosquito or the fly?”

   (13) Weiß deine Schwester, was Allergien oder Erkrankungen auslösen kann?
   know your sister what allergy or disease cause can
   “Does your sister know what can cause allergy or disease?”

   “Does your sister know what can cause allergy or disease?”

   (14) Ist es ihr schlimmer, dass Hans seine Mutter oder seinen Vater belügt? Sentential
   is it for-her worse that Hans his mother or his father lie
   “Is it worse for her that Hans lies to his mother or his father?”

   Problem: Why is there no overt movement if the disjunctive phrases are wh-phrases?
   → See below.

Table 1. Questionnaire Design and Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wh-Q:</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AltQ:</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interpreting wh-phrases in-situ without movement

Han & Romero (2004) propose that there is an invisible whether in disjunctive phrases which undergoes movement.

However, there is no island effects.

Question: Why is there no overt/covert movement if the disjunctive phrases are wh-phrases?

Baker (1970): There exists a Q morpheme in every question and it functions as a Q Op. It is realized as Q particles in wh-in-situ languages and is replaced by a wh-particle in wh-movement languages.

→ The Q morpheme in Y/NQs is replaced by whether (or something like that in other languages)

→ Han and Romero (2004): an invisible whether (or other wh-particle) in matrix Y/NQs and AltQs in English

→ Evidence: Early Modern English, Yiddish and Hindi

Cheng (1991): There exists a Q morpheme. If a language has a Q particle for Y/NQs, it doesn’t have wh-movement in wh-Qs. If a language has a Q particle for Y/NQs, it must also have (co)vert Q particle for wh-Qs.

→ The Q morpheme in wh-in-situ languages is realized as Q particles.

→ The one in wh-movement languages is realized through Spec-head Agreement with a moved wh-particle.


There exist Q morpheme/Op in every question which needs to be activated.

Q Op in wh-movement languages needs to be activated by a wh-phrase (through wh-movement or a base generated whether).

The one in wh-in-situ languages needs to be activated by a (on) overt or covert particle.

→ Wh-phrases in-situ in either type of language don’t need to move because the activated Q Op can interpret them and determine their scope.

→ Whether (or something like that in other languages) is base generated in Spec-CP because there is no island effects.

Remaining Questions

• The (obligatory and optional) occurrence of question particles in Chinese

   - Optional in matrix wh-Qs

   14) ni stang zhidao ma? you want know what Q-particle
   "What do you want?"

   - Mandatory in matrix Y/NQs

   14) ni stang zhidao ma? you want know Q-particle
   "Do you want to know?"

   - Mandatory absent in embedded wh-Qs

   14) ni stang zhidao sha shei? You want to know who he is?

   - Mandatorily absent in embedded Y/NQs (another scenario)

   14) ni stang zhidao la (i.e. la meiyou / lai mei lai),
   you want know he come or not come not come
   "You want to know whether he has come.”

• The ungrammaticality of a sentence with both a wh-phrase and a disjunctive phrase

14) ni stang zhidao shei xiam A haishi B? you want know who like A haishi B
   "Is it A or is it B that you wonder who likes?”

2. Scope marking structure in German

3. Bad under if and probably/might & good under no matter in Chinese

4. Island effects in wh-Qs and AltQs

5. Interpreting wh-phrases in-situ without movement

6. Remaining Questions

7. Evidence: Early Modern English, Yiddish and Hindi