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QUESTION WORDS AS HEDGES IN CONVERSATIONAL CHINESE:
A Q AND R EXERCISE

Yung-O Biq

This paper examines the diverse uses of shenme, a question word in Chinese. Shenme's grammatical functions in a sentence are well known, but its discourse functions are under-investigated. In unplanned discourse such as conversation, shenme can function as (a) an interactional hedge (filler), (b) a referential hedge (disclaimer), and (c) an expressive hedge (mitigator in negation). This polysemous case, in which one grammatical word is used to mean different things in different contexts, poses a challenge in language learning/teaching. Attempting to establish a perspective that might lead to pedagogical solutions to this problem, I adopt the Quantity and Relation framework proposed in Horn (1984, 1989) and provide an analysis on how these diverse meanings arise and how they are related to one another. First, shenme is semantically vacuous and referentially indefinite in fulfilling its grammatical functions. Next, shenme's versatility in functioning as different kinds of hedge in Chinese discourse is a result of the speaker's exploitation of this lexically "void" grammatical word from both the Q-based (Quantity) approach and the R-based (Relation) approach to pragmatic inferences.

0. INTRODUCTION

Functioning as discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987), question words in Chinese manifest uses different from their uses in a sentence. The grammatical functions of question words in a Chinese sentence are not limited to forming interrogative constructions, but all in all these functions have been well described and analyzed (Chao, 1968; Li and Thompson 1981). In contrast, the discourse functions of question words, which are especially prevalent in spoken discourse, remain largely undiscussed in traditional treatments of Chinese grammar (for exceptions see Chao (1968) and Lu (1980) for preliminary descriptions). Such an inadequate account of the discourse functions of grammatical words naturally gives rise to difficulties in language learning/teaching, especially at the advanced level, where ways of expressing linguistic nuances are expected to be acquired by the student to improve his/her competency in effective communication.

A direct pedagogical solution to this problem is beyond the
scope of the present discussion. Instead, this paper attempts to offer an analysis that might eventually lead to such a solution. I propose that the discourse uses of question words can be viewed as functional extensions of their canonical sentential uses via linguistic pragmatics and conventionalization. In this paper I focus on one of these question words, *shenme* 'what', since it is the most versatile of question words and possesses the largest number of discourse functions.

In conversation, *shenme* can behave as a hedge (Lakoff, 1975; Kay, 1983, 1984) and display three types of discourse function, all of which serve to convey the speaker's attitude toward what (s)he is saying or how (s)he says what (s)he is saying. By examining these three uses in terms of the 'Q and R' framework proposed in Horn (1984, 1989), I suggest that *shenme*'s versatility as different kinds of hedge in Chinese discourse is a result of the speaker's exploitation of this referentially indefinite question word from both the Q-based (Quantity) approach and the R-based (Relation) approach to pragmatic inferences.

In the following, Section 1 briefly introduces Horn's 'Q and R' framework. Section 2 quickly reviews the grammatical functions of question words in Chinese and their semantics. Section 3 discusses *shenme*'s three types of discourse function in terms of Horn's 'Q and R', and Section 4 presents concluding remarks.

1. HORN'S Q AND R

Horn's Quantity (Q) vs. Relation (R) dichotomy is his attempt at reducing the well-known Gricean conversational maxims (Grice, 1975). Following mainly Zipf (1949) and Martinet (1962), Horn explains natural language phenomena such as conversational implicata, lexical formation, and language change in terms of two ever-present and antinomic factors, the principle of sufficient effort and the principle of least effort. Thus, most of the Gricean maxims (except for the quality maxim) are boiled down to two principles in Horn's new scheme. The Quantity-principle (Q) is hearer-based and requires the speaker to say as much as (s)he can; the Relation-principle (R) is the opposite, that is, it is speaker-based and allows the speaker to make the least effort by saying no more than (s)he must.

The pragmatic inferences respectively generated from these two principles are different from each other. According to the Q-principle, what the speaker says is taken as sufficient, and the Q-principle generates upper-bounding conversational implicata. In saying '...p...', the speaker implicates that (for all (s)he knows) '...at most p...'. Scalar predications best exemplify the Q-based implicata. If I tell you that some of my friends live in San Francisco, you would infer, based on the Q-principle, that not all of my friends live in San Francisco. (If
that were the case, I would have said so.) On the other hand, the R-principle allows what the speaker says to be taken as necessary, thus generating lower-bounding implicata. In saying ‘...p...’, the speaker may license the R-inference that (s)he meant ‘...more than p...’. Indirect speech acts are the best examples of R-based inferences. If I ask you whether you can tell me the time, in a context where your ability to do so is not in doubt, you would infer, based on the R-principle, that I am doing something more than asking about your ability -- I am in fact asking you to tell me the time.

I will be using this framework to analyze the three discourse functions that *shenme* displays in conversational Chinese in Section 3.

2. GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONS

The grammatical functions of a question word refer to those functions which are indispensable to the formation of the propositional content of the sentence which contains it. I will use only four question words, *shenme* 'what', *shei* 'who', *zenme* 'how', and *nei/na* 'which', as examples for discussion. First, question words are interrogatives in a question ('what, who, how, which').

(1) a. Ta shuo-le *shenme*?
   3s speak-ASP what
   What did (s)he say?

b. Shei kan-jian-le ta?
   who see-see-ASP 3s
   Who saw him/her?

c. Ni *zenme* xie zhei-ge Zhongguo zi?
   you how write this-M Chinese character
   How do you write this Chinese character?

d. Ni yao nei yi-ben shu?
   you want which one-M book
   Which book do you want?

The second grammatical function of a Chinese question word is as a quantifier marking the indefinite but generic type of reference (totality) at the pre-verbal position ('whatever, whoever, however, whichever'). In this pre-verbal position, the question word is usually accompanied by the adverbs *gou* 'all' or *ye* 'also'.

(2) a. Ta shenme dou chi.
   3s what all eat
   He eats everything.

   b. Ta shi ye bu xihuan.
   3s who also NEG like
   (S)he likes nobody.

   c. Zhe-jian shiqing, ni zenme zuo dou keyi.
   this-M matter you how do all OK
   You can deal with this matter in whatever way you like.

   d. Wo nei yi-ben shu dou bu xiang kan.
   I which one-M book all NEG want read
   I don't want to read any of the(se) books.

Finally, Chinese question words can mark the indefinite but individual type of reference (existentiality) ('some(-)').

(3) a. Wo xiang chi yidiao shenme tian de dongxi.
   I want eat a-little what sweet DE stuff
   I'd like to eat some sweet stuff.

   b. Gebi haoxiang you shei zai shuo hua.
   next-door seem have who at speak word
   It seems there's someone speaking next door.

   c. Ta bu zhidao zenme yi xiu jiu ba zheji ge dongxi xiu 3s NEG know how one fix then BA this-M thing fix
   hao le.
   good CRS
   I don't know but somehow he fixed this thing without going through much trouble.

   d. Wo nei tian yao zai gen ni liao liao.
   I which day want again with you chat chat
   I want to talk to you again some day.

All question words are referentially indefinite when they are used to fulfill any one of the above three grammatical functions. However, the extent to which they can be said to carry meaning varies. Shenme, the most vacuous of them, contains no semantic features and merely refers to an indefinite 'entity'. The personal shei 'who', in comparison, refers to an indefinite
'person', and the manner question word, *zenme* 'how', refers to an indefinite 'manner' or an indefinite 'degree'. I will return to the referential indefiniteness and semantic voidness of question words shortly.

3. DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS

The question words vary in terms of their discourse functions, which, unlike their grammatical functions, contribute not so much to the formation of the propositional content of the sentence as to how this sentence is to be understood in a particular context. *Shenme* has the following three discourse functions: (a) as an interactional hedge (filler), (b) as a referential hedge (disclaimer), and (c) as an expressive hedge (mitigator in negation). Let me now discuss each one of these in turn.

3.1. Interactional Hedge

First, *shenme* is frequently used as a filler for blanks in spontaneous speech, often accompanied by other characteristics of fillers such as prolonged syllables or repetition. This use is characterized as an interactional hedge because when the speaker throws these 'empty' *shenme*'s into his/her flow of speech, (s)he is reacting to the pressure of the interactional, spontaneous speech setting to yield the 'right' to speak. Generally speaking, if the speaker does not speak within an appropriate span, (s)he loses the floor to others who want to speak (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974)). Examples (4) and (5) are cases in which *shenme* is used as an interactional hedge.2

(4) (ELC:804)
(2 jokingly comments on the taping of conversation.)

1Z. Wow you ren hai zai lu ah, wow jiuming ah! wow have person still at tape ah wow help ah

    Wow someone is still taping (our speech), wow help!

2B. Hahahaha.

    hahahaha

    Hahahaha (laughs).

3Z. Na ni nei-ge *shenme*: Walter neixie ye dou lu jinqu then you that-M what Walter those also all tape into

    Then your that what: those (words) about Walter were

4 le.

    CRS

    also tape-recorded.
(5) (FSB:478)
(F and M are talking about the fact that village people all want to go into the city.)

1M. Eh, zhei-ge hao, yinwei shenme a,
eh this-M good because what PRT

Eh, this is good, because what.

2F. Mmmmm.
mhmm

Mmmmm.

3M. Ni kan xiang Xifang zhei-zhong guojia, bifang na
you see like West this-M country for example take

You see like these countries in the West, for

4 Meiguoshuo ba. zhei-ge:, eh, tian-li haoxiang mei
USA speak PRT this-M eh field-in seem NEG

take the United States, this:, eh, there

5 shenme ren le.
what people PRT

seem not to be many people on the farms anymore.

Another question word, shui 'who', can fill blanks in spontaneous speech where references to person are not readily provided. However, question words other than shenme are in general much less frequently used as fillers. Shui is exemplified in (6).

(6) (MSB:139)
(F is trying to recall somebody's name.)

1F. Suoyi wo jide shi shui a? Nei-ge Faguode, zuizao
do I remember be who PRT that-M French earliest

So I remember it's who? That French one, the

2 yi-ge shehuizhuyizhe jiaozuo:, jianzhi shi, wo zhi
one-M socialist call simply be I only

earliest socialist (who's) called:, Oh God, I can

3 hai hui yong Zhongwen shuo Faguo ren mingzi jiao
still can use Chinese say French person name call

only use Chinese to say the French person's name(,)
If *shenme* (as well as *shei*) as an interactional hedge is considered in Horn's Q & R framework for pragmatic inferences, it is the Q-principle that is at work here (given the R-principle, of course). When the intended information is not readily delivered by the speaker, (s)he fills in the blanks with the semantically vacuous and informationally inadequate substitute, *shenme*, as if this is the most informative form (s)he can offer at the moment of speaking. The speaker, in other words, saying as much as (s)he can, thus licensing an upper-bounding inference that the speaker is not in an epistemic position to employ an informationally stronger form.

3.2. Referential Hedge

The second type of discourse function *shenme* illustrates is the referential hedge. At times a speaker may deliberately be vague, fuzzy, or sloppy about clarifying the referent(s) of speech so that (s)he can disclaim responsibility for the accuracy or truthfulness of what (s)he is saying. Such a reserved attitude on the part of the speaker toward the referentiality of his/her own speech can be either a sincere disclaimer, in which case the speaker is indeed uncertain about what (s)he has just stated; or it can be a rhetorical device for conveying the speaker's sarcasm about what (s)he is saying, in which case the speaker is certain about what (s)he has just stated but wants to show his/her rejection of or disassociation from it.

This kind of use is first illustrated by the grammatical patterns for enumeration in which *shenme* is used. Both 'shenme + enumerated items' and 'enumerated items + shenme(de)' are fixed patterns in Chinese, meaning 'A, B, ..., and so on and so forth'. By using *shenme* the speaker waives responsibility for providing an exhaustive list of items to be enumerated. *Shenme* is thus a disclaimer for precise referentiality in enumeration (see examples (7) and (8) below).

(7) (MSB:56)
(F talks about why medical care in the earlier 20th century China was inadequate. She says that the doctors were not interested in curing common diseases that the masses would most likely have, but rather:)

4 Boliye.
Boliye

it's Boliye.
1F. Tamen zhi xiangxin Xifang de yixue, they only believe West NOM medicine
They only believed in the Western medicine,

2M. Lyidiar dou bu dong. one bit all NEG understand
Didn't know anything.

3 Unhuh.
unuh
Unhuh.

4F. erqie zhi xiang qu yanjiu zui jianduan birushuo moreover only want go study most advanced for examp plus (they) only wanted to study the most advanced

5 shenme xinzang a, nao a zhe yi lei de dongxi. what heart PRT brain PRT this one M NON thing (i.e., difficult) (topics) for example (things like) heart, brain, and things of this sort.

(8) (MSB:90) (The subject speaks about why doctors did not care about the needs of the common people.)

1M. Qishl a, shuo dao neixie shiqing a, bu jinjin shi actually PRT talk about those thing PRT NEG only be Actually, speaking of those things, it is not just

2 zhei-ge geren, eh, yao qiu ming qiu li this-M individual eh want pursue fame pursue money that eh the individuals, eh, wanted to pursue fame

3 a shenme dengdeng. PRT what and so forth and fortune and things like that.

Next, shenme can be placed before a linguistic expression when the speaker intends to note that (s)he is not fully sure of the referential information of that linguistic expression. Shenme is thus again a disclaimer, conveying the speaker's uncertainty about his/her upcoming statement. As a disclaimer shenme prefices mostly NPs and clauses that constitute reported speech. In the following, it prefices a referentially indefinite NP in (9), a proper name in (10), and a clause in (11).
1F. Ergie zhengge de yi tao jiaoyu, sixiang, shi yao: moreover whole NOM one M education thought be want
   Moreover the whole education, the ideology, asked: a

2 ziji cheng ming cheng jia, ziji faming shenme self achieve fame achieve expert self invent what
   person to achieve fame and become an expert, to

3 weida de dongxi.
   great NOM thing

   invent some (sort of) great things.

By using shenme, the speaker F seems to be saying that she does not know precisely what weida de dongxi 'great things' may refer to in this context. The indefinite referential status of the NP is emphasized by the use of shenme.

Shenme can also be used as a disclaimer for the referentiality of a proper name; (10) is an example.

(10) (SJS:20)
   (Z is speaking about the recently available disposable contact lenses. She says that the manufacturers are applying for a patent now.)

1Z. Shuo xianzai yijing zai, zai shengqing ba, say now already at at apply PRT
   (it) says now (they're) already applying (for a

2 kan nei ge shenme Yiyaoju: you mei you
   see that M what FDA have NEG have
   patent), (they'll) see if that FDA (whatever it

3 [uh: tongguo,
   uh pass
   is] has uh: approved it or not,

4B. Zhende a?
   really PRT
   Really?

With shenme, Z seems to be saying that she knows the name FDA but she is uncertain about precisely what the Food and Drug
Administration is.

_Shenme_ can be a referential hedge not just for NPs. In (11) _shenme_ prefaces a clause which constitutes the reported speech in a presentative sentence.

(11) (SJS:18)
(same topic as (10))

1Z. Wo kan baozhi shang xie shuo _shenme_
   I read newspaper on write say what
   I read in the newspaper where it said _something_

2 xianzai you dai le jiu diu de nei zhong.
   now have wear ASP then throw NOM that M
   _like_ that there are disposable ones (contact
   lenses) now.

_Shenme_ functioning as a disclaimer is obvious here: since she read this news in the newspaper, Z does not want to be fully responsible for the referentiality (thus the truthfulness) of what the clause conveys, i.e., the news that the disposable contact lenses are available now.

All the examples given above (9 to 11) are instances of the use of a sincere referential hedge in their respective contexts; but (12) is an example in which the speaker is being sarcastic when _shenme_ is used as a disclaimer for referentiality.

(12) (SJS:142)
(Z talks about her girlfriend's divorce.)

1Z. Zhende wo juede ta yinggai gen ta xiansheng
   real I feel 3s ought to with 3s husband
   Indeed I think she should divorce her husband,

2 lihun, nei ge si jiahuo ben de yaosi
   divorce that M damn fellow stupid DE to death
   That damn guy is so stupid

3 baba shi _shenme_ Guoda daibiao hai shi jiaoshou,
   Dad be what Rep Nat Assm still be professor
   (His) daddy is a Representative to the National
   Assembly (Big deal! Who cares!), (he (the father)
   is even a professor.

Obviously Z is being quite judgmental about her friend's husband and about the man's family background here. She specifies the profession of the man's father, but shows her rejection -- by
prefacing the profession with shenme -- of the (implicitly assumed) prominent social status associated with that profession.

Other question words are not seen to function as disclaimers as shenme does. For example, one cannot add shen 'who' in front of a personal name or its equivalent to signal the speaker's disclaimer of knowledge of the referent of this name; rather, as in the FDA case in (10), shenme will be used on such an occasion.

Considering this disclaimer (referential hedge) use of shenme in the Q & R framework, we can see that this is again the Q-principle at work. Given the R-principle, which holds that whatever one says is significant, the shenme in the linguistic string must be relevant to the speech context. Since the lower-bounding meaning of shenme is semantically vacuous and referentially indefinite, its coexistence with the following speech licenses the Q-inference that the referentiality of the prefaced speech should be taken as devalued (i.e., indefinite or void). Thus, in the examples of enumeration (where shenme may follow, instead of preface, the enumeration), the reference for each unsaid item is indefinite and vague. In the examples of referential hedge, the devaluation can be interpreted differently in different extra-linguistic circumstances. It may convey the speaker's candid admission of ignorance about the referential information, rendering an indefinite and vague interpretation (i.e., 'sort of', 'something like', 'whatever it is'). Or the devaluation may convey the speaker's sarcastic attitude toward what (s)he is referring to, rendering a void and rejectionary interpretation (i.e., 'Big deal!', 'Who cares!').

3.3. Expressive Hedge

The third kind of discourse function occurs with negation only. Consider the following examples, comparing (13a) with (13b), and (14a) with (14b).

(13) a. Ta shuo de hua mei(you) daoli.
   3s speak NOM speech NEG justification

   There is no truth in what he said.

b. Ta shuo de hua mei(you) shenme daoli.
   3s speak NOM speech NEG what justification

   There isn't much truth in what he said.

(14) a. Zhao-jian shiqing bu shi kunnan de shiqing.
   this-M matter NEG be difficult NOM matter

   This matter is not a difficult one.
b. Zhei-jian shiqing bu shi shenme kunnan de shiqing. this-H matter NEG be what difficult NOM matter

This matter is not a particularly difficult one.

In both (b) sentences, the negation is followed by shenme, and the truth-condition of the (b) sentences remains the same as that of the (a) sentences in that they are all negative statements; however, while the negation without shenme sounds straightforward, the negation with shenme sounds less direct and is de-emphasized. The (b) sentences are understatements of their (a) counterparts.

Another question word, zenme 'how', can be used in the same way to mitigate negation (see examples (15) and (16) below).

(15) a. Ta bu hui xie Zhongguo zi.
    3s NEG can write Chinese character
    (S)he doesn't know how to write Chinese characters.

b. Ta bu zenme hui xie Zhongguo zi.
    3s NEG how can write Chinese character
    (S)he doesn't know how to write Chinese characters
    well.

(16) a. Jintian bu re.
    today NEG hot
    It's not hot today.

b. Jintian bu zenme re.
    today NEG how hot
    It's not terribly hot today.

Thus, as represented in (17), when negation is followed by shenme or zenme, the negative tone of voice is mitigated.

(17) 'NEGATION + shenme/zenme + ...' is weaker than 'Negation + ...'

I call this type of use of question words (both shenme and zenme) an expressive hedge. The question here is how shenme and zenme are conventionalized as a linguistic means to mitigate negation.

Following the native speaker's intuition about the language, the traditional descriptive works on Chinese characterize the question words used as expressive hedges in negation as meaning 'special', 'outstanding', or 'extreme' (e.g., Lu, 1980). In other words, the question words are treated as intensifiers in negation constructions.
Bolinger (1972) and Horn (1989) have pointed out that when a speaker negates the intensified form of a predicate, this negation is pragmatically likely to be an understatement of the (straightforward) negation of that predicate. This rhetorical calculation, once conventionalized, involves the 'strengthening rule' formulated in Horn (1989), which is seen in (18).

(18) (not + intensifier) + ADJ. --> rather unADJ;
(or --> rather ADJj, where ADJj is the antonym of ADJ;)
(Horn, 1989: 354)

Examples of this (negative) understatement by means of the strengthening rule are seen in both English and Chinese. 4

Consider (19) and (20):

(19) not particularly friendly --> rather unfriendly
not especially bright --> rather stupid
not terribly fond of someone --> rather dislike someone

(20) bu shi ding haochi
NEG BE top delicious

not particularly delicious --> rather not delicious at all

Apparently, the traditional treatment of the Chinese shenme and zenme as expressive hedges in negation can be accounted for by (18); I.e., the negative understatement hinges on the interpretation of the question words as intensifiers. Two examples from my conversational data are (21) and (22).

(21) (SJS:149)
(Z talks about the neighborhood her friend lives in.)

17. Nei zhong quyu dangran bu shi shenme hao qu. that M area of course NEG be what good area

That area, of course, was not some/a particularly good neighborhood.

(22) (SJS:69)
(Z says that she never likes to study.)

17. Wo congclai bu juede wo zai shu limian hui zhao I ever NEG feel I at book in will find

I've never felt that I could find in books

2 dao you shenme xihuan de dongxi.
attein have what like NOM thing

anything (I) particularly like.

The interpretation of the question words as intensifiers is
the result of the R-based approach toward their semantics. First, let us see why it is not the Q-principle at work. For the referentially indefinite question words, the Q-principle would have generated the upper-bounding implicata of indefiniteness—given that I say as much as I can, if I say something indefinite, I mean at most something indefinite -- but indefiniteness can hardly qualify the question words as intensifiers.

Instead, through the R-principle, a 'more than p' interpretation is generated -- given that I only say as much as I must, if I say something indefinite, I might mean something more than indefinite, that is, something particular -- and this amounts to a 'stereotypic' interpretation, in which the upper-bounding 'stronger' senses of the question words, i.e., 'specific', 'particular', and 'definite', are inferred to be the intended meaning (cf. the principle of 'inference to the best' by Atlas and Levinson (1981)). These senses, of course, work well as intensifiers with negation to render understatement (via (18)).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The use of shenme and zemen as expressive hedges in Chinese negation is parallel to euphemisms and indirect speech acts. All of them are conventionalized linguistic devices motivated by the politeness strategy of avoiding threatening negative face (i.e., 'don't impose', cf. Brown and Levinson, 1978). Shenme and zemen as expressive hedges in negation in modern Chinese may still not be fully conventionalized across speakers and/or across contexts, but these uses have certainly appeared not only in the spoken language but also in the written language.

On the other hand, the uses of shenme as an interactional hedge (filler) and as a referential hedge (disclaimer) are primarily seen in the spoken language only. Although the prevalence of these uses are not necessarily correlated with the distinctive characteristics of spoken language (as opposed to written language)(cf. Bessner, 1988), it seems that the interactional and spontaneous characteristics of spoken language do contribute to the inception of polysemy (Big, ms.; Guy, et al, 1986; Traugott, 1989).

Together, the interactional hedge (as filler), the referential hedge (as disclaimer), and the expressive hedge (as mitigator for negation) exemplify the Q and R '[m]axim clash ... in indefinite contexts' (Horn, 1989: 196). Just as Q and R generate different referential inferences for the English indefinite article a in 'I slept in a car yesterday' (not my car) and 'I broke a finger yesterday' (most likely, my finger)(Horn, 1989), the two ever competing principles induce quite different inferences on how the indefinite shenme should be 'interpreted in different contexts.

Thus, although they are of entirely different grammatical
categories, the English a and the Chinese question words, especially shenme, call for the same reasoning processes for pragmatic inferences when they are used in different contexts. Understanding the principles for pragmatic inferences, which are constantly in use in our native language, can prepare us to have a better grip on the problems in a foreign language that involve the same principles.

In summary, I have examined in this paper several ways in which shenme can be used as a hedge in Chinese conversation. I have presented a treatment of these uses within the Hornblen 'Q & R' framework with the hope that this analysis may offer an indirect contribution to language learning/teaching. I have argued that some of shenme's uses are inferred through the Q-principle, such as its use as an interactional hedge in spontaneous speech, and as a referential hedge in enumeration, in claiming responsibility for referential accuracy of one's speech, and in denigrating what one is talking about. On the other hand, the use of shenme and zenme as two expressive hedges for understating negation is achieved through the R-principle. Finally, but not least important, it is the intrinsic semantic emptiness and referential indefiniteness of question words that give rise to the versatility that shenme displays as a discourse marker.

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NOTES

1In order to illustrate my points, I use both artificial examples and naturally occurring conversational data throughout
this paper. The conversational examples are (4) - (12), and (13) - (22). The conversational data come from two kinds of cases: conversation. One set constitutes two one-hour two-party conversations between a female and a male. The other set constitutes two multi-party conversations, the total length of which is 1.5 hours. I was a participant in both of the multi-party conversations, although each time with a different group of friends. I want to thank Sandy Thompson for making the first set of tape recordings available for my use. I also want to express my appreciation for the interest and good humor of those who allowed me to tape-record their speech.

Each conversational example is marked with an index symbol such as (XYZ:123), followed by a brief description of the scenario in which the segment of conversation occurs. The conversational segment is inevitably broken into lines of transcription. Lines are numbered consecutively throughout the segment, regardless of the identity of the speaker. However, when a new speaker begins his/her speech, a letter (e.g. F, T, B) representing the identity of this speaker will appear after the line number of his/her first line. This is true for all transcription and translation conventions:

- A large bracket marks the starting point of an overlap between two speakers' speech.
- A colon marks a lengthened syllable.
- Mandarin key words discussed in the text and their English equivalents in the translation are both underlined.
- The English in parentheses is my effort at paraphrasing the Chinese speech for a more colloquial English translation.

Besnier (1990) has reported similar uses of question words in Tuvaluan as hedges to express speaker's doubt or uncertainty about a statement. It is likely that this kind of use of question words in discourse for rhetorical effectiveness is widespread, if not universal, across languages.

As pointed out by Horn (1989) and Bolinger (1972), (but not all) intensifiers used in the 'NEGATION + intensifier' pattern can conventionally implicate negative understatement. However, how many among them are conventionalized, i.e., to be predicted by the strengthening given in (18) across speakers and across contexts, is another issue. Compared with most of the 'lexical' intensifiers (i.e., degree words), both shenme and zemae are much more conventionalized as intensifiers used in Chinese negative understatement.

REFERENCES


Big, Y. ms. The multiple uses of the second-person singular pronoun in conversational Mandarin.


