
Metalinguistic *Wh*-Placeholders

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The Cantonese *wh*-word *me* ‘what’ can serve as a proform to substitute syllables, heads and phrases when the speaker cannot utter these elements for pragmatic reasons, e.g. euphemism (1) or forgetting someone’s name (2). The reference of *wh*-placeholders is contextually determined.

- (1) Popo jiging me-zo laa.
old.lady already what-PERF Prt
‘The old lady already WHAT-ed (= died).’
- (2) Mak-me-ji hai jinjam Dakgwok Zungli.
Mak-what-ji be current Germany Chancellor
‘Mak-WHAT-ji (= Merkel) is the current Chancellor of Germany.’

Unlike most other uses of *wh*-words, *wh*-placeholders can flexibly substitute elements of various syntactic categories, e.g. N, V and A. Cheung (2015) analyzes that *wh*-placeholders are metalinguistic proforms denoting linguistic expressions (type *u*). The type *u* expression then type-shifts to the intended category (e.g. <*e*> for nouns). What has not been discussed is that if unconstrained, *wh*-placeholders are predicted to replace expressions of any category. However, they only substitute non-word syllables (2), NPs, N’s, VPs, V’s (1), A’s (i.e. *u*, *e*, <*e*, *t*> and <*e*, <*e*, *t*>>) but not higher types like P’s, D’s, quantified DPs, etc. This suggests that higher-type *wh*-placeholders may be denied due to a constraint similar to the *No Higher-Type Variables* constraint (e.g. Chierchia 1984, Baker 2003, Landman 2006).

References: • Baker, M. (2003): *Lexical categories: Verbs, nouns and adjectives*. CUP. • Cheung, L. (2015): Uttering the unutterable with *wh*-placeholders. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 24(3), 271-308. • Chierchia, G. (1984): *Topics in the Syntax & Semantics of Infinitives & Gerunds*. PhD diss., UMass Amherst. • Landman, M. (2006): *Variables in natural language*. PhD diss., UMass Amherst.