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 jiping 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).