On the Nature of Indeterminate Expressions in Chinese and Korean: Focused on WH-phrases in Conditionals
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This work aims to characterize the featural properties and the licensing mechanisms of the indeterminate expressions (I-Exs) in Chinese and Korean, both of which are ambiguously interpreted, by specially comparing the behaviors of the so-called wh-conditional construction in the two languages. It will be argued that I-Exs in Chinese differ from the Korean counterparts w.r.t. their featural compositions and their licensing mechanisms, which are responsible for various parametric differences in the two languages.

Chinese bare (or wh-) conditionals (Cheng & Huang 1996, Liu 2016, 2018a, 2018b, a.o.) are exemplified in (1) and (2). I-Exs in this construction are interpreted as if they are variables bound by the same operator such that the two I-Exs, one in the antecedent clause and the other in the consequent clause, co-vary in their reference, as indicated in the English translations. (See Gu 2009 and Huang 2018 on the properties of the operator.) Literal translations of (1) and (2) into Korean will be like (3) and (4), where the two I-Exs do not co-vary. To get a co-varying reading, the I-Ex in the consequent clause has to be replaced by an overt/null pronoun, as in (5) and (6).

(1) shei xian lai, she (jiu) xian chi.
(2) ni yao shenme, wo (jiu) mai shenme gei ni.

Who first come, who (then) first eat
You want what, I (then) buy what give you
'(If) x comes first, (then) x eats first.'
'(If) you want x, (then) I will buy x for you.'

(3) nwu-ka mence o-myen, nwu-ka mence mek-nun-ta.
Who-Nom early come-if, Who-Nom early eat-Pres-DEC
'(If) someone comes first, (then) someone eats first.'

(4) (ney-ka) mwues-ul wenha-myen, nay-ka mwues-ul sacwu-keyss-ta.
You-Nom what-Acc want-if I-Nom what-Acc buy; give-will-DEC
'If you want something, I will buy something for you.'

(5) nwu-ka mence o-myen, e/ku-ka mence mek-nun-ta.
Who-Nom early come-if, e/He-Nom early eat-Pres-DEC
'(If) someone comes first, (then) someone eats first.'

(6) (ney-ka) mwues-ul wenha-myen, nay-ka ekuses-ul sacwu-keyss-ta.
You-Nom what-Acc want-if I-Nom e/it-Acc buy; give-will-DEC
'If you want something, I will buy something for you.'

This work attributes the above discrepancy between Chinese and Korean to the differences in the featural property and the licensing mechanism of the I-Exs in the two languages. More specifically, Korean I-Exs are indefinite expressions with a [-wh] feature and as such they are licensed in situ. In contrast, Chinese I-Exs bear a [+wh] feature and they undergo an overt (ATB, in the cases of wh-conditionals,) wh-movement but the tail of the chain(s) is pronounced, as schematically represented in (7). (cf. Bruening and Tran 2006 and Cheung 2006)

(7) wh-phrase IF ... wh-phrase ..., ... who-phrase ...
         ↑↑         ↑↑ wh-movement in each clause
            |          |            | ATB-movement/Remerge

The claim made in this work gains support from various facts. First, as can be seen in (1)-(4), I-Exs in Korean, but not in Chinese, are subject to the so-called novelty condition, which constrains indefinite NPs (Heim 1982, Chierchia 2000). The fact goes against Cheng and Huang (1996), who analyze I-Exs as indefinite nouns unselectively bound by a universal quantifier provided by default in conditionals. The fact cannot be accounted for by Chierchia's (2000) pronoun analysis, either: I-Exs in Chinese wh-conditionals behave like R-expressions, not like pronouns, as pointed out by Bruening and Tran (2006). Neither by Cain and Luo's (2011) equational statement analysis, as the I-Exs take isomorphic forms in wh-conditionals,
Selected references


Huang, James. 2018. Analyticity and wh-conditions as unselective binding per excellence. An handout read at BLCU in Peking, China.


but not in equational sentences: (8) vs. (9).

(8) *Shei xian lai, shehmen ren tongyang de ren xian chi.
who first come what person the-same DE person first eat (from Crain and Luo 2011, 166)

(9) a. The Morning Star is the Evening Star.
   b. A man who drinks alcohol is the one/the same person who gets a hangover.

The requirement of isomorphism strongly supports a remerge (ATB movement) analysis.

Second, WHY, which is hardly used as an indefinite, is allowed in (10) of Chinese wh-conditions but not in (11) of Korean conditionals. Elma-(mankhum)-na ‘how much’ Adj behaves similarly (as opposed to elma (mankhum), which is ambiguously interpreted). (See (12) and (13)).

(10) ni wishenme xihuan Zhangsan, wo jiu wishenme tayan ta.
You wish/like Zhangsan, I then wish/like him.

You-Nom why/like-John-ul reason for he-Acc dislike-Pres-DEC

(12) *ney-ka elma (mankhum)-na yeppu-n os-ul wenha-myen, nay-ka e/ku kes-ul sacwu-keyss-ta.
You-Nom how/much amount-INA-DEM pretty dress-Acc want-if I-Nom e/it-Acc buy;give-will-DEC

(13) ney-ka elma (mankhum) yeppu-n os-ul wenha-myen, nay-ka e/ku kes-ul sacwu-keyss-ta.
You-Nom how/much amount pretty dress-Acc want-if I-Nom e/it-Acc buy;give-will-DEC

If you want (a certain degree of) pretty clothes, I will buy them for you.

Thirdly, Chinese WHY, weishenme, in wh-conditions displays an ECP effect when in an island context, another clue that movement is involved in wh-conditions: (1) vs. (14).

(14) a. *Ni xihuan [weishenme xie de shu], women jiu weishenme xie shu.
you wish/like [what person the-same book], women-jiu wish/like book

b. *Ni [yinwei ta kai er shangxin], wo jiu weishenme gaoxing.
you because he why leave thus sad I then wish/like happy

There are also indications that I-Exs in Chinese undergo overt movement but the tail copy is pronounced: (i) They do not show scope interactions with a quantifier in an weak island (Aoun and Li 1993), intervention effects (Huang 1982), or wh-island effects (Huang 1982), unlike their Korean counterparts, which show opposite behaviors. (Examples are omitted for a space reason.) Finally, we observe that Korean bare common nouns, unless accompanied by a numeral classifier, but not I-Exs, can have an E-type pronoun construal, as (15) and (16).

(15) ney-ka catongcha-ul (*han tay) wenha-myen, nay-ka (ka) catongcha-ul sacwu-keyss-ta.
you-Nom car-Acc one Cl. want-if I-Nom that car-Acc buy;give-will-Dec

You-Nom what-Acc want-if I-Nom that what-Acc buy;give-will-DEC

If you want something, I will buy something for you.

Based on this critical data, we adopt Elbourne’s (2005) approach to E-type pronouns, assuming that anaphoric elements in the consequent clause in Korean are E-type pronouns.

In conclusion, wh-conditions in Chinese employ an ATB wh-movement, due to the featural property of the I-Exs, while the Korean counterparts employ an E-type anaphoric strategy (possibly repeating a common noun phrase).