

Syntactic and Pragmatic Asymmetries of the Left-Peripheral Discourse Operator *Shenme* ‘what’ in Mandarin Chinese: From Partial Filtering to Total Blocking

Barry C.-Y. Yang/National United University/barryyang@nuu.edu.tw

The interrogative pronoun *shenme* ‘what’ in Mandarin Chinese frequently exhibits a high degree of grammaticalization by serving as a non-truth-conditional discourse marker in spoken language. This paper addresses a highly systematic yet underexplored linguistic phenomenon: the contrast between the post-head operator in [X + *shenme*] and the pre-head operator in [*shenme* + X]. Despite their superficial symmetry, these two constructions trigger radically different communicative consequences in discourse.

Consider a scenario in which Speaker A complains about being tired. Speaker B, instead, refutes Speaker A by (1a) or (1b), where both of them seem to negate the proposition of “Speaker A’s being tired.”

- (1) A: Hao lei a!
so tired EXCL
B: a. Lei *shenme*?! Cai zou ji bu.
tired WHAT just walk several step
‘[You are] not that tired! [You] just walked several steps.’
b. *Shenme* lei?! Ni zheng-tian dou tang-zhe.
WHAT tired You all-day all lie-DUR
‘What do you mean, “tired”?! You’ve been lying around all day.’

However, the propositional negation does not seem quite right, since in (2a) and (2b), the [X] is a noun phrase and there is no proposition to negate.

- (2) a. Mianzi *shenme*?! Baoming yaojing!
face WHAT survival important
‘Disregard your pride! (Forget about “face”!) Survival comes first!’
b. *Shenme* mianzi?! Ni zao pocang le.
WHAT face You already bankrupt PERF
‘What do you mean, “face”?! You’re already bankrupt.’

Under further scrutiny, we find that the post-head [X + *shenme*] negates the degree (1a) or priority (2b) of [X] whereas the pre-head [*shenme* + X], the qualification (1b) or existence (2b). More precisely, the former undergoes “partial filtering” (downgrading) [X], while the latter undergoes “total blocking” of [X]. Partial filtering accepts the discourse framework but downgrades the value, degree, or importance of the entity (Evaluation Denial), while total blocking completely rejects the discourse presupposition, revoking the legitimacy or appropriateness of the concept entirely (Presupposition Denial).

To formalize the pragmatic effects of these operators, we adopt the Table Model (Farkas & Bruce, 2010). In this dynamic discourse framework, conversations are driven by proposals. When a speaker makes an utterance, it is placed on "The Table" as an active issue. If accepted by interlocutors, it enters the Common Ground (CG). Crucially, proposals possess "priority" and "relevance" to the Question Under Discussion (QUD) (Roberts, 2012). Interlocutors can manipulate items on the Table not merely by assigning truth values (True/False), but by negotiating their right to enter the CG. More concretely, the [X + *shenme*] construction targets the pragmatic weight of [X]. The speaker acknowledges the objective existence of [X] (or the

interlocutor's commitment to it) but denies its priority, relevance, or scalar degree. Under the Table Model, the post-head *shenme* acts as a Partial Filter. It intercepts the CG update ([CG]), and, therefore, stalls the proposal on the Table without destroying the validity of the conversational move itself.

Conversely, the [*shenme* + X] construction functions as Metalinguistic Negation (Horn, 1989). It bypasses the substantive content of [X] and directly attacks the speaker's right to utter it. When a speaker says [*shenme* + X] in a highly inappropriate context, s/he is not negotiating the degree/importance of [X]. Instead, s/he is revoking the register and epistemic presuppositions required to use [X]. On the Table Model, the pre-head *shenme* performs Total Blocking. It deems the speech act infelicitous ([SA]), and, therefore, sweeps the proposal off the Table entirely before CG negotiation can even begin.

Drawing on the Cartography of the Interactional Left Periphery (Wiltschko, 2021), we argue that structural height directly determines the scope of pragmatic negation. The [X + *shenme*] construction operates at the lower Grounding Phrase (GroundP) via internal merge of X to its specifier. It performs “partial filtering” to strip the pragmatic weight (priority/scalar value) of X while retaining its proposal on the Table. Conversely, the [*shenme* + X] construction operates at the higher Speech Act Phrase (Speas and Tenny 2003). Taking X as its complement, it executes “total blocking,” by cancelling the felicity conditions of the utterance and sweeping the proposal off the Table entirely. We further provide syntactic evidence from reconstruction effects (Binding Principle A and idiom chunk integrity) such as (3) to prove that X uniformly originates within the propositional domain in both constructions.

- (2) a. [Zijide pengyou]_i shenme?! Zhangsan_i juehui buhui beipan _____i de.
 self-POSS friend WHAT Zhangsan definitely won't betray EMPH
 Lit. 'His own friend what?! Zhangsan definitely would never betray (them).'
- b. Shenme [zijide pengyou]_i?! Zhe-zong-qingkuang-xia Zhangsan_i hai hui
 what self-POSS friend this-CL-situation-under Zhangsan still will
 you _____i ma?
 have Q

‘What do you mean, [his own friends]?! In this situation, would Zhagnsan ever have any?’

We conclude that structural height directly determines the scope of pragmatic negation. The post-head *shenme* filters the pragmatic weight of an assertion, while the pre-head *shenme* destroys the foundational felicity of the speech act. By grounding these discourse operators in syntax this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the syntax-pragmatics interface.

Selected References:

- Farkas, Donka F., & Bruce, Kim B. 2010. On reacting to assertions and polar questions. *Journal of Semantics* 27(1): 81–118.
- Horn, Laurence R. 1989. A natural history of negation. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roberts, Craige. 2012. Information structure in discourse: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics and Pragmatics* 5, 1-69.
- Speas, Margaret, and Carol Tenny. 2003. Configurational properties of point of view roles. In Anna Maria Di Sciullo, ed., *Asymmetry in grammar*, 315–344. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Wiltschko, Martina. 2021. *The grammar of interactional language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.