

You saying what? A semantic/pragmatic account of Singlish *wh*-in-situ

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1 The optionality of *wh*-fronting in Singlish

- One characteristic which differentiates Singlish from *both* of its major input language varieties of English and Chinese¹ in that *wh*-phrases can move (unlike Chinese), but do not have to (unlike English)

(1)	a. What you eating?	Singlish
	b. You eating what ?	
(2)	a. What are you eating?	English
	b. * Are you eating what ?	
(3)	a. * Shenme ni chi	Mandarin
	b. Ni chi shenme	

- The bulk of the existing literature on this phenomenon has focused on establishing the underlying structure of these constructions, particularly in light of Bobaljik and Wurmbrand's generalisation that no language allows for both *wh*-fronting and true *wh*-in-situ questions
- Chang (2016) argues that *wh*-in-situ questions in Singlish behave on a par with their English counterparts (i.e. they are not true *wh*-in-situ questions), while Lan (2016) argues that *wh*-fronting constructions are underlyingly cleft questions (*wh*-in-situ questions are true questions)
- Sato and Ngui (2017) argue that, *pace* Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2015), both *wh*-fronting and *wh*-in-situ constructions in Singlish constitute genuine information-seeking questions
- More recently, this latter position by Sato and Ngui (2017) has been bolstered by empirical findings stemming from experimental work conducted by Tan and Shen (2025)
- In their concluding remarks, Tan and Shen note that although they argue "that *wh*-optionality between *wh*-movement and true *wh*-in-situ exists, it does not necessarily mean that the two operations are in free variation" and that "whether *wh*-movement and *wh*-in-situ questions have different pragmatic or semantic effects and are preferred in different contexts" remains an open question (p.887)

¹I use Chinese as the umbrella label for all of the Sinitic varieties present in the contact ecology of Singlish.

- The desiderata of this presentation is thus three-fold: (i) to establish that *wh*-in-situ questions are semantically distinct from their *wh*-fronting counterparts, and (ii) to identify the (pragmatic) conditions under which this semantic contrast can be detected, and (iii) to sketch an analysis of *wh*-in-situ questions that accounts for this divergent semantic behaviour in said contexts

2 *Wh*-fronting and *wh*-in-situ are not the same

- What does it mean for two questions to have differing semantic content?
- Per Alternative Semantics, the semantic content or denotation of a question is the set of possible answers to said question
- For any two questions, given a stable context: to have different semantic content $\equiv$ to admit different answers
- In many cases, the answers admitted by a *wh*-in-situ question and its *wh*-fronting counterpart are indeed the same, meaning that they are semantically equivalent *in those contexts*
- To establish that the two are *completely* semantically equivalent, we must determine that they are semantically equivalent across *all* contexts; I will demonstrate that this is NOT the case
- A hint as to where we might find this semantic distinction comes from Lan's 2016 proposed treatment of *wh*-fronting questions as cleft questions (NB: I will not be adopting this analysis)
- Our baseline *wh*-fronting question (WFQ) in (1a; repeated below) would therefore be translated/paraphrased as follows:
 - (4) What you eating?
 - (5) What is it that you are eating?
- Comparing the English cleft question to its unclefted counterpart, we see that the cleft question has a (much stronger) existential presupposition, and, additionally, feels more strongly exhaustive
 - (6) What are you eating?
- The difference between cleft questions and regular questions is essentially the difference between a regular declarative and a clefted declarative
- Clefted declaratives (and, consequently, cleft questions) differ from their unclefted counterparts in being, semantically, identificational; they also introduce additional existential and uniqueness presuppositions
- The identificational nature of a cleft question may be responsible for the strong exhaustivity requirement, since it is difficult to conceptualise partial identification of an existentially quantified entity
- In framing the distinction between WISQs and WFQs as being a matter of there being an underlying cleft, we can surmise that these are the relevant properties which can be used to distinguish them

- Indeed, there is a vague sense that a WFQ is somehow more exhaustive than a WISQ
- However: the identificational nature of cleft questions means that they cannot be uttered in out of the blue contexts where the potential referents for the *wh*-phrase are (discourse-)salient²

(7) Context: A walks up to a stranger, B, at 3PM.

A: Excuse me, {#what is it that you ate for lunch today?, ✓ what did you eat for lunch today?}

- Notably, the relative acceptability of WISQs vs. WFQs in such a context is *flipped* cf. the predictions of Lan (2016)

(8) Context: A walks up to a stranger, B, at 3PM.

A: Excuse me, {#you eat what for lunch today?, ✓ what you eat for lunch today?}

- A few lessons from this exercise: (i) Lan (2016) is correct in that there is a semantic difference between WISQs and WFQs, (ii) he is wrong in that it cannot be about clefting, and (iii) context matters (i.e. it's a semantico-pragmatic issue)

3 When context matters

- As noted above, the distinction between WISQs and WFQs is not present across all contexts
- We already saw an example wherein the absence of preceding context blocked the use of a WISQ, but not a WFQ
- Based on this, I conclude that WFQs are bona-fide vanilla interrogatives, and focus my attention on isolating the right contexts in which WISQs have distinct semantic content from their WFQ counterparts
- To isolate the relevant contextual property which licenses the special WISQ interpretation, I will keep to our singular baseline example (repeated below as 9), whilst modulating the context surrounding it
- For completeness, let us consider a toy model in which the domain of individuals (outside of the speaker and addressee) are *John*, *Mary*, and *Sue*

(9) You inviting who to the party?

(10) Who you inviting to the party?

- Consider a context in which the party is a prom-style event; each individual invites one partner
- In such a context, we can derive the focus denotation of (10) by applying pointwise Functional Application to the possible values of the *wh*-phrase at the position in which it is interpreted within the structure
- This yields the set of propositions corresponding to the possible answers to the question, i.e. {I invited *John*, I invited *Mary*, I invited *Sue*}

²This may also be partially due to additional requirements introduced by the added existential presupposition.

- Crucially, given the parameters of the context, we do **NOT** have to consider sums of individuals
- The WISQ (9) and its WFQ counterpart ultimately collapse semantically, since the askee will respond with the only true proposition within the possible answer set
- However, when we switch to a different context (Context Housewarming), where the party is a housewarming party, we now need to consider sums of individuals when determining the semantic content of the question
- We can conceptualise these sums as forming a join-semilattice; abstracting over the propositional content, the resulting focus denotation of the vanilla interrogative (10) is $\{John, Mary, Sue, John \oplus Mary, John \oplus Sue, Mary \oplus Sue, John \oplus Mary \oplus Sue\}$
- There are a total of seven possible answers, where the maximal possible answer entails all of the other possible answers; a similar entailment relation holds between some but not all of the partial answers
- This means that a singular unique true answer is no longer expected; indeed, world knowledge dictates that multiple people are to be invited for the party in question to qualify as a housewarming party
- In a regular interrogative, the askee is expected to provide the maximal true answer, which is once more unique
- Claim: these are contexts in which WISQs are special
- To isolate HOW they are special, we must consider how speakers navigate WISQs when they encounter them, particularly from the perspective of the askee
- First, let us assume that each of John, Mary, and Sue have been invited to the party
- Given this context, a reasonable response to encountering a WISQ is to determine the relationship between the asker and the askee, and to then evaluate if any of the possible attendees share the same relation
- For example, if the asker and askee are colleagues with each other as well as John and Sue, then a natural interpretation of the WISQ is as a targeted question concerning the (non-)attendance of John and Sue
- Which relation is relevant depends on any number of contextual factors, e.g. if the asker is known to be a massive extrovert and is keen to meet new people, the relevant individual(s) for the targeted WISQ becomes the non-mutuals, i.e. about Mary
- WISQs are therefore differentiated when the context is able to support this sort of targeted questioning
- However, they are still subject to standard conditions which apply to questions more broadly, e.g. that the askee provide the maximal true answer
- This makes them distinct from mention-some questions, which similarly do not require the canonically maximal answer (i.e. the mention-all answer)
- In contexts where the maximal true answer is expected to correspond to a singleton entity, targeted questioning is not supported, the presupposition introduced by the WISQ is thus non-actionable on the part of the askee³

³Or is it? I return to this at the end of the presentation.

- Out-of-the-blue contexts similarly do not have enough discourse-accessible content for the presupposition to be satisfied
- That said, there does appear to be a disconnect between an unexpected WISQ in singleton-contexts versus an unexpected WISQ out of the blue; I return to this as part of my analysis

4 Analysis

- I adopt Sato and Ngui’s analysis of Singlish *wh*-questions as involving two distinct C heads, one which triggers *wh*-fronting, and one which does not
- Proposal: the C head associated with WISQs introduces a presupposition that the domain of quantification for the *wh*-phrase is a contextually-salient subdomain of the usual quantificational domain
- In out-of-the-blue contexts, no such contextually-salient domain is accessible, resulting in infelicity
- In non out-of-the-blue contexts, contextual salience can manifest as discourse-salience, wherein the relevant subdomain is explicitly recoverable from preceding discourse
- Alternatively, contextual-salience may draw upon shared (non-linguistic) knowledge between interlocutors, and may thus require metalinguistic reasoning about the asker’s teleological goals in order to determine the appropriate subdomain
- First: all *wh*-phrases that we encounter in our day-to-day lives have their domains restricted, otherwise a generic *wh*-question like *who likes cats?* would require the consideration and elimination of all eight billion humans on Earth
- What a WISQ does is that it highlights that there is a subset of the currently active subset of the universal domain which is of particular interest to the asker
- To illustrate how this works in practice, let us return to our toy model above
- Context: A and B are colleagues, alongside John and Sue. B is inviting John, Mary, and Sue to their housewarming party.
- When A asks B who they are inviting to the party, the maximal true answer is that B has invited the sum of John, Mary, and Sue.
- However, if A were to frame the question in WISQ form, this explicitly encodes the presupposition that A is particularly interested in some subset of the potential invitees, John, Mary, and Sue
- B, as the askee, is then able to determine, by examining the context, which subset of individuals this is
- In the absence of any additional context, B’s understanding of default teleological goals associated with asking about the invitee list dictates that A is most likely interested in mutual acquaintances
- In keeping with the maxim of quantity, B therefore provides the maximally true answer relative to this restricted subset of A and B’s mutual acquaintances, i.e. John and Sue

4.1 Innocent WISQs and the Keanu Scenario

- While I have previously characterised contexts in which sums are not part of the *wh*-domain as being non-discriminating contexts for WISQs, this is not strictly true
- If the effect of a WISQ is to select for a subdomain that is contextually salient, this subdomain selection should not be sensitive to any ordering relations within the greater domain itself
- I contend that the general unavailability of the targeted WISQ interpretation in such contexts stems from the competing pressure to provide a true answer to the question posed
- Just in case the true answer falls within the scope of the most salient subdomain, the appropriate answer in response to the WISQ and the WFQ completely coincide
- The issue arises when it doesn't: the askee then faces a conundrum, since no true answer is available in this case
- The askee now has two options: either (a) provide a negative answer to the *wh*-question, or (b) ignore the subdomain restriction that is activated by the WISQ
- Given the underspecified mechanism by which subdomains are selected and activated, going with the first option (a) presents the risk of having computed the wrong subdomain, and thereby providing the asker with the wrong answer
- Conversely, going with option (b) only flouts, using neo-Gricean terminology, the maxim of quantity, whilst minimising the risk of violating it by mistake, since the true answer will either entail the relevant targeted propositions corresponding to the appropriate subdomain intended by the asker, or their negated counterparts
- In this way, ignoring the presupposition introduced by the WISQ is, on balance, optimal for navigating the discourse goals traditionally associated with the posing of a genuine interrogative question
- However: this also means that in contexts in which an unmistakably pre-eminent subdomain is made salient, option (a) is available
- That is, a WISQ can accommodate (or, indeed, solicit what seems to be) a polar answer, particularly when the subdomain is pruned to contain only a singular individual:

(11) Context K: A has raised to B the possibility of inviting Keanu Reeves to their housewarming party.

B: You inviting who to the party?

A: {Ya, I invited Keanu! / No lah, I didn't invite Keanu in the end.}

- Note that unlike a standard yes/no response to a polar question, the corresponding propositional content has to be asserted
- I tentatively suggest that this is because the WISQ is still ultimately a *wh*-question, though I am open to suggestions on this front
- Note: this pattern is also slightly complicated by the fact that *wh*-words in Singlish can also be used as indefinite nominals, which can then be merged with a definite article to yield a specific indefinite-type reading:

(12) A: You inviting (the/that) who to the party?

- This usage of the *wh*-phrase does not necessitate the provision of the full propositional answer, however, so this does not discount the patterns observed above

4.2 What about out-of-the-blue contexts?

- Out of the blue contexts do not support innocent WISQs, because the presupposition introduced by the asker simply cannot be accommodated
- Furthermore, the lack of a clear decision problem blocks the teleological goal-based metalinguistic analysis required for the askee to make sense of the WISQ
- WISQs are therefore (almost completely) unsalvageable in out-of-the-blue contexts

5 Concluding thoughts

- There is an interesting observation that we can make here with respect to the broader picture of how interrogatives are encoded
- What I have tried to demonstrate is that WISQs are deeply dependent on preceding discourse
- Interestingly, this seems to be the mirror image of what has been observed for *wh*-the-hell, which have been analysed as being aggressively non-D-linked, but also necessarily front, even in languages which otherwise do not require or even, in some cases, allow *wh*-fronting (Pesetsky 1987)
- Whether this is coincidental or if there is something deeper requires further consideration of the behaviour of *wh*-phrases cross-linguistically
- If anybody knows of parallel phenomena in other languages, please let me know!

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