

Asking questions in context: An elicitation study of the choice of question forms in Mandarin Chinese conversation

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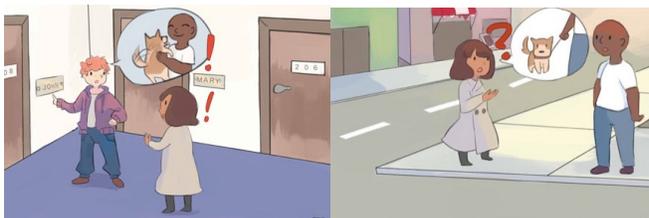
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Abstract: Mandarin Chinese has various forms of questions that convey the same truth-conditional meaning, such as disjunctive questions (1) and particle questions (2), but they can only be used felicitously in different contexts.

- (1) *Waimian xia-mei-xia yu?* (2) *Waimian xia yu le ba?*
outside drop-NEG-drop rain outside drop rain SFP SFP
'Is it raining outside?' 'It is raining outside, isn't it?'

The questions in (1) and (2) both ask about whether it is raining outside. However, the disjunctive question in (1) is only felicitous in neutral contexts where the speaker has no bias towards a positive or negative answer, whereas the particle question in (2) is only felicitous in contexts where the speaker is biased towards a positive answer. While the truth-conditional aspects of question meanings have been extensively discussed in formal semantics (Hamblin, 1958, 1973; Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1984; Krifka, 2001), only in recent years has there been a growing interest in the non-truth-conditional aspects, including the target of confirmation, the degree of politeness (Yang & Wiltschko, 2016), the speaker bias, the nature of the evidence (Guo, 2000; Sudo, 2013), and the timing of evidence acquisition (Strauss, 2005).

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between the grammatical forms of questions in Mandarin Chinese conversation and the contexts in which they are used. The main research question addressed is “What forms of Mandarin questions are used in what contexts?” Guided by the multi-functionality approach of Wiltschko et al. (2018), this study systematically examines the contexts of 12 different forms of Mandarin questions, such as A-Not-A questions and different particle questions, along the dimensions of the timing of evidence acquisition, the strength of evidence, and the relative social relations between interlocutors. Following the targeted construction storyboard methodology (Burton & Matthewson, 2015), this study collected data from 12 native speakers of Mandarin Chinese through elicitation. The resulting dataset includes 185 Mandarin questions. The storyboards used in the elicitation were subsets of the Eh-lab conversation boards (Wiltschko, 2018), as illustrated in Figure 1.



Context: John tells Mary that their common friend Greg has a new dog.

Shortly after Mary runs into Greg on the street.

Mary: “Hey Greg, how are you? **You’ve got a dog now, eh?**”

Figure 1. Sample storyboard from “You’ve got a dog now, eh?”

The results of this study indicate that the choice of grammatical forms of Mandarin questions correlates with the timing of evidence acquisition, the strength of evidence, and the relative social relations between speakers. This research provides insight into the use and distribution of Mandarin questions in conversation. By establishing a systematic analytical procedure for

Mandarin questions, this study contributes to cross-linguistic research on how contexts affect question formation in other languages, ultimately leading to a more comprehensive understanding of question production and perception in human communication.

Keywords: Mandarin Chinese, questions, contexts, storyboard elicitation

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