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# A DISCUSSION OF THE SYNTAX OF WH QUESTIONS FOR NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS ACQUIRING MANDARIN CHINESE AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

JONGHEE YOUN AND WEN MENG

## ABSTRACT

*This paper is an analysis of the similarities and differences in syntactic structure of WH-questions between English and Mandarin Chinese. While Subject-Auxiliary inversion, Do-support, and WH-movement are required processes in forming an interrogative sentence in English, the same types of transformation are not needed in. This can be one of the challenges for native English speakers acquiring Chinese WH-questions. The aim of this study is to provide pedagogical implications to native English speakers of Chinese as a second language and their teachers by providing an overview of how the syntax of WH-questions behaves in both languages and how it can be mentally represented for English speakers. Pedagogical implications will also be discussed.*

## 1.0 Introduction

A recent survey (Rosenberg, 2014) stated that Mandarin Chinese is the most widely used language in the world. It is spoken by 882 million people as their first language (L1) worldwide and this figure is almost three times as large as that of English native speakers. More and more English speaking populations are getting interested in learning Chinese. Reuters named this phenomenon “China Syndrome” and reported that, in the US alone, more than 25,000 kids of school age are currently involved in Chinese-learning programs and the number is increasing (Tailor, 2014). But at the same time, many English speakers find it hard to acquire Chinese WH-questions because of the different syntactic structure. Huang (1982) mentioned that “the formation of a WH-question in Chinese does not involve the overt dislocation of a WH-word.” Therefore, it is beneficial for both Chinese learners and their teachers to pay attention to syntactic differences of WH-questions between English and Chinese. The derivational steps used in Transformational Grammar are employed to demonstrate the contrast in the mental procedure, which speakers of the two different languages go through when they form a WH-question.

## 2.0 Construction of the Deep Structure

According to Koffi (2010), “all English sentences in the deep structure follow the canonical order...SVO (Subject-Verb-Object)...in their most basic affirmative forms.” All other forms, such as negative, interrogative, passive, etc. are derived from the deep structure. Therefore, a deep structure is “closer to the threshold of consciousness” (p. 82)

which is how a human brain processes and develops the basic form into what is actually seen or heard. This claim is in accordance with the Transformational grammarian's view that multiple steps need to be taken before forming a surface structure. From here, we start this study with a simple English question.

Did Brad buy the car? (Koffi, 2010).

The sentence above syntactically qualifies as a question in English. And here we add a WH- word to the question for the purpose of this study.

(1) When did Brad buy the car?

In the deep structure, every component of a sentence must go back to fit the initial SVO order (Koffi, 2010). Therefore, the deep structure of sentence (1) is presented as sentence (2).

(2) Deep Structure: Brad past buy the car when

The process of changing the deep structure into the surface structure involves several steps. Each step is called a derivation. The entire sequence of derivational steps will be discussed later. For now, we need to examine the Chinese counterpart.

(3) 布拉德 什么时候 买了 这辆车?  
 Brad shen me shi hou mai le zhe liang che  
 Brad when buy the car?  
 "When did Brad buy the car?"

In the surface structure, Chinese also follows the SVO order as shown in sentence (3). However, it is necessary to know whether the WH-word, *shen me shi hou* (when) is moved to the present position, between the subject and the main verb, or it remains at the initial default position. Thus, a possible answer to the question, "when did Brad buy the car" should also be examined in the following sentence (4),

(4) 布拉德 今天 早上 买了 这辆车  
 Brad jin tian zao shang mai le zhe liang che  
 Brad this morning bought the car.  
 'Brad bought the car this morning.'

In sentence (4), *jin tian zao shang* "this morning" qualifies as a time adverb because it passes the "When Test" (Koffi, 2010, p. 264). Unlike English, where the default position of an adverb occurs after the main verb (Koffi, p. 276), in Chinese, the adverb occurs before the main verb. For example, *jin tian zao shang* (this morning), is

located between the subject *Brad*, and the verb, *mai le* (bought). It is the same position as *shen me shi hou* (when) in the interrogative sentence (3). In short, in Chinese WH-syntax, a time adverb is located between the subject and the main verb in a sentence, regardless of whether it is a WH-question or an affirmative sentence. For this reason, it can be concluded that Chinese is categorized as a *Wh-in situ* language. *Wh-in situ* languages are those where WH-elements remain in the position where they are generated in the deep structure. Korean, Japanese, and Chinese belong to this category (Gao, 2009). Now, it is possible to compare how a WH-question is constructed both in English and Chinese. And before this, it should also be noted that 了 “le” which occurs after the main verb, 买 “mai” in the sentence (3) is a Past Tense marker. Therefore, the deep structure of sentence (3) is formed by the sentence below.

(5)	布拉德	什么时候	买	这辆车
	Brad	shen me shi hou	Past mai	zhe liang che
	Brad	when	Past buy	the car

### 3.0 Contrastive Analysis of WH-question Formation in English and Chinese

Based on the above analyses, derivational steps of an English sentence, “When did Brad buy the car?,” and its Chinese counterpart are demonstrated as follows,

	English	Mandarin Chinese
<b>Deep structure</b>	Brad Past buy the car when	Brad shen me shi hou Past mai zhe liang che
<b>1. Question</b>	Q Brad Past buy the car when	Q Brad shen me shi hou Past mai zhe liang che
<b>2. Do-support</b>	Q Brad Past <b>Do</b> buy the car when	
<b>3. Subject-AUX Inversion</b>	Q Past Do Brad _ buy the car when	
<b>4. WH movement</b>	Q When Past <b>Do</b> Brad buy the car _	
<b>5. Affix Hopping</b>	Q When Do <b>Past</b> Brad buy the car _	Q Brad shen me shi hou mai Past zhe liang che
<b>6. Spell Out rule</b>	When did Brad buy the car	Q Brad shen me shi hou mai le zhe liang che
<b>Surface structure</b>	When did Brad buy the car?	Brad shen me shi hou mai le zhe liang che?

When a WH-question is derived from the deep structure in English, it goes through three different steps, Do-support, Subject-auxiliary inversion, and WH-movement, before it gets to the Affix Hopping stage. In contrast, the Chinese counterpart skips all three different derivations that we see in its English counterpart.

#### 4.0 Pedagogical Implications: Negative and Positive Transfer

Negative transfer occurs when a language learner's L1 plays a role as the source of error in an L2 (Ellis, 1997). Even though the idea of interference of L1 with L2 was more popular when the behaviorist theories were prevalent, many L2 learners, especially in the low proficiency level, make mistakes by naturally following the same structure they have in their own language. For example, beginner level Korean learners of English often make mistakes in or have difficulty using relative pronouns which do not exist in their L1. In contrast, positive transfer is known as the influence of an L1 by which a learner acquires an L2 feature without difficulties.

The fact that English and Chinese sentences follow the same sentence order (SVO) may confuse Chinese language instructors whose audiences are native English speakers. When learners produce a structurally correct Chinese affirmative sentence, it is not clear whether their outcomes are based on proper knowledge about Chinese syntax or if it is by accident (Gao, 2009). In other words, the correct sentence may have resulted from L1 influence, namely, positive transfer. However, when it comes to forming a question, English speakers are more likely to demonstrate their actual competence through changing the syntactic makeup of a sentence.

Our suggestion here is that the Chinese language teachers of native English speakers should ask learners to pay attention to echo questions in English. Even though WH-movement is a basic construction in English, there are cases where the WH-element remains *in-situ*. To give an example,

- (6) A: Johnny ate some insects.  
B: Johnny ate *what*?

The question above, "Johnny ate *what*?" is called an echo question. Echo questions are asked when a person requests repetition because he/she did not hear a certain part properly or could not believe what the interlocutor said (Park, 2008). Since English speakers already have the structure without WH-movement in their L1, it will be increasingly easy to acquire a Chinese WH-question by implementing their existing linguistic knowledge (positive transfer).

In addition to the idea of echo questions, we also recommend teachers help students develop their consciousness by creating tasks that help them recognize the syntactic differences between English WH-questions and Chinese WH-questions. Fotos (1994) claimed that integrating grammar instruction and communicative language use is as effective as teacher-centered formal grammar teaching in promoting knowledge of the target structure in an L2. Therefore, teachers should provide a learning environment where English speakers are encouraged to ask and answer questions in Chinese through

which they can practice and internalize the syntactic construction of Chinese questions during authentic communication.

### 5.0 Conclusion

Although Chinese and English follow the same SVO syntactic order, speakers of the two languages resort to different processes in forming WH-questions. In English, WH-words are fronted to sentence initial positions while, in Chinese, they remain *in-situ*, in the position where they originated in the deep structure. Due to this syntactic difference, successfully making a Chinese WH-question is very difficult, especially for beginning level native English speakers. Teachers thus can facilitate the acquisition of Chinese WH-questions by leading learners to take advantage of the existing WH-*in situ* construction in English, by using echo questions, and by implementing consciousness-raising tasks during which they can practice with WH-questions in Chinese.

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