Choice Functions and the Interpretation of Indefinite Polarity Wh-phrases

A consensus about English indefinite NPs has seemed to emerge in the recent literature since Reinhart's (1992) proposal that their interpretations may involve a choice function mechanism. However, there are diversified views concerning how the choice function mechanism should be executed; in particular there is a debate regarding which level(s) existential closure should apply to. Reinhart (1997) and Winter (1997) suggest that indefinites can always be interpreted as choice function variables and existential closure may apply to any level. Kratzer (1998), on the other hand, proposes that choice function mechanism is only available for the widest scope indefinites and choice function variables are free variables that are provided a value by the context rather than being existentially closed. With respect to the above different approaches, Matthewson (1998) argues that scopal possibilities of indefinite NPs in St'át'imcets favors Kratzer’s approach with a slight revision to the effect that choice function variables are always existentially closed at the highest level. She even suggests that the widest-scope stipulation is a universal restriction on the choice function mechanism. Is it really true that all languages utilize the same choice function mechanism and allow no cross-linguistic variation? On the basis of scopal possibilities of Chinese indefinite polarity Wh-phrases, in this paper, I show that Matthewson’s suggestion is wrong. Just like non-polarity indefinite NPs in St'át'imcets, polarity indefinite wh-phrases in Chinese must make use of choice functions in their interpretations. However, unlike non-polarity indefinite NPs in St'át'imcets, Chinese indefinite polarity wh-phrases may not have widest scope interpretation (or their licensing condition will be violated). But they freely allow wide and narrowest scope. Intermediate scope, on the other hand, is generally not available unless an extra VP is available in the structure. (Compare (3) and (4) on page 2.) Reinhart-Winter’s approach to choice functions overgenerates scopal possibilities for Chinese polarity wh-phrases, because this approach predicts that Chinese polarity wh-phrases may freely have intermediate scope. Kratzer-Mathewson theory of choice functions fairs no better, because as polarity items, Chinese indefinite polarity wh-phrases are always embedded within the scope of some operator. Hence, they can never have widest scope interpretation. The data in Chinese thus refutes Matthewson’s claim that the widest-scope stipulation is a universal restriction on the choice function mechanism and Kratzer’s idea that non-widest scope indefinites do not use choice function mechanism. In fact, Kratzer-Mathewson’s theory also wrongly predicts that Chinese polarity wh-phrases do not have narrowest scope. To overcome the above mentioned problems, I propose that existential closure for choice function variables introduced by Chinese polarity wh-phrases applies not to just any level as in Reinhart (1997) and Winter (1997) but is restricted to IP and VP. If this proposal is correct, it implies that choice function behavior may vary from language to language such that in some languages existential closure over choice function variables may apply to any level, while in other languages, it is restricted in its application to certain maximal projections. My findings in
Chinese thus revive the possibility, rejected by Matthewson (1998), that the choice function mechanism may vary from language to language or from indefinite NPs in one language to indefinite NPs in another language, or even from one type of indefinite NP to another type of indefinite NP within the same language.

Some Data:

(1) Ta haoxiang mei/bu(neng) chi shenme (dongxi) de-yangzi
    he seem not/not eat what thing seem(18)
    a. ‘It seems that he did/does not (want to) eat anything.’
    b. ‘It seems that there is something such that he did/does/can not (want to) eat it.’

(2) Haoxiang [yaoshi shei bu qu de-hua, ta jiu bu qu] de-yangzi
    seem if who not go if he then not go seem
    (i) ‘It seems that if someone or other does not (want to) go, he won’t go.’
    (ii) ‘It seems that there is somebody such that if that person does not go, then he won’t go.’

(3) Haoxiang mei-ge ren dou bu yuanyi gen shuohua de-yangzi
    seem every man all not willing with who speak seem
    (i) ‘It seems that everyone is not willing to speak to anybody.’
    (ii) ‘It seems that there is somebody such that everyone is not willing to speak to him.’
    (iii) ‘It seems that everyone is such that there is somebody whom he is not willing to speak to.’

(4) Haoxiang meige ren dou gen laoshi shuo yaoshi shei bu qu de-hua, ta jiu bu qu
    seem every man all to teacher say if who not to if he then not go
    (i) ‘It seems that some person is such that everyone said to the teacher that if that person does not go, he will not go.’
    (ii) ‘It seems that everyone said to the teacher that some person is such that if that person does not go, he will not go.’
    (iii) ‘It seems that everyone said to the teacher that if some person or other does not go, he will not go.’

References


