Justifying a Two-way Distinction of Questions in Taiwanese Southern Min

Syntactically-formed interrogatives in Taiwanese Southern Min (TSM) are usually categorized into four sub-types: (i) yes-no questions, (ii) A-not-A questions, (iii) disjunctive questions, and (iv) wh-questions. Instead of feeling satisfied with the classification, we pursue a simpler and more scientifically insightful taxonomy in this paper, the binary classification, and attempt to justify this binary classification of questions in TSM.

This binary taxonomic identification has been applied to Mandarin Chinese (MC). For example, Che et al. (2018) argue for a two-way distinction of questions in MC, grouping alternative (including A-not-A and disjunctive questions) and constituent questions (a.k.a. wh-questions) together in one category and polar (i.e. yes-no) questions in the other, according to their distinct syntactic behaviors. The former category is information-seeking (IS) questions, as the speaker asks for information with this question type, while the latter is confirmation-seeking (CS) questions, with which the speaker seeks confirmation of the truth of the question from the addressee. Wu & Her (2018) provide a solid semantic foundation for this two-way distinction by proposing that the semantics of CS questions is a set of truth values whereas the semantics of IS questions is a set of proposition. The aim of this paper is to justify this two-way distinction of IS versus CS questions in TSM.

To substantiate this dichotomy in TSM questions, we adopt some applicable syntactic tests, which have been devised in the literature to differentiate the interrogative types in MC and TSM (e.g., Tang 1998, 1999, Hsieh 2001, Che et al. 2018), and the test with käm, which is proposed by Lau (2010a) to distinguish between sentence-final interrogative particles and question tags in TSM, as our repertoire of tests for the two-way distinction of questions in TSM. These tests, including the compatibility with the adverbs, tsin-tsiânn ‘really’ and tâu-té ‘after all’, the capability of serving as an indirect question, the sensitivity to intervention effects, and the co-occurrence with käm, constitute more comprehensive and effective measures for taxonomic identification of questions in TSM. In the light of the tests, an IS question can co-occur with the adverb tâu-té and is incompatible with the adverb tsin-tsiânn, whereas a CS question behaves the other way around. In addition, an IS question is subject to intervention effects; on the other hand, a CS question is immune to intervention effects. Also, an IS question can function as an indirect question while a CS question cannot. Such syntactic divergences are grounded on the distinct semantics of IS and CS questions proposed by Wu & Her (2018), and the mismatch would lead to semantic contradiction as well as syntactic violation. Finally, the test with käm serves as a means to confirm whether TSM has genuine CS polar questions, viz. yes-no questions ending with true interrogative particles. It can be said that the interrogative particles which cannot co-occur with käm are genuine interrogative particles under CP because they, when appearing in the same sentence, compete for [+Q] feature checking.

With a rigorous examination of the previously-established four types of questions in TSM, we propose that all questions in TSM can be classified as CS polar versus IS
constituent questions. The application of the tests to disjunctive questions and wh-questions shows that both types of questions are IS questions par excellence, in that they are compatible with tāu-té rather than tsin-tsiànn, are subject to intervention effects, and can function as an indirect question. What we are more concerned about here are yes-no questions and A-not-A questions (more specifically, VP-not-VP questions). It has been argued in the literature (e.g., Hsieh 2001, R. Huang 2008) that the latter type is usually realized as VP-not questions by deleting the second VP. Thus, negative particles that occur sentence-finally in such questions are often mixed up with real interrogative sentence-final particles, which form yes-no questions, and even tags. The complications in this mixed list of sentence-final particles can be clarified by applying the tests. Questions ending with negative particles pattern with disjunctive and wh-questions since they have the same syntactic behaviors with respect to the tests, as shown by (1); therefore, they are subsumed under the category of IS questions. On the other hand, questions ending with the other particles (including tags) show the opposite results, as illustrated by (2); as a result, they are categorized as CS questions, and the co-occurrence constraint with kám can further split them up into two sub-categories, real polar questions and tag questions.

(1) a. Li (tāu-té/*tsin-tsiànn) beh tsiàh gû-bah bô?
    You after.all/really want eat beef NEG
   *‘After all, do you want to eat beef or not?’
   b. *Li kan-na beh tsiàh gû-bah bô?
    You only want eat beef NEG
   c. Guá mǐg a-pah i̍k̍ beh tsiàh gû-bah bô?
    I ask Dad he want eat beef NEG

(2) a. Li (*tāu-té/tsin-tsiànn) beh tsiàh gû-bah nîh/sioh?
    You after.all/really want eat beef Q/tag
   b. Li kan-na beh tsiàh gû-bah nîh/sioh?
   c. *Guá mǐg a-pah i̍k̍ beh tsiàh gû-bah nîh/sioh?

Furthermore, the status of kám-questions has been a controversial issue in the literature. R. Cheng (1997), Tang (1998, 1999), Hsieh (2001), and Lau (2010b), among others, argue that kám-questions are yes-no questions, while just a few researchers, e.g., C.-T. Huang (1988, 1991) and L.-S. Huang (2016), claim that they are a counterpart of MC A-not-A questions. Our testing results support the claim made by the latter group; based on this, we argue that kám-questions should be subsumed under the category of IS questions, which receives further support from the diachronic investigation of kám (see Yue-Hashimoto 1991 and Wei 2010), in which kám is the portmanteau word of the modal ke and negation, being a realization of [+Q] feature.

Selected references: