Some Similarities and Differences between Chinese and English in Sluicing

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Sluicing sentence refers to a certain type of compound sentence in which one clause is a wh question whereby all sentential elements, but the wh-phrase itself alone, are omitted. In semantic interpretation, a sluicing sentence is comparable to a full wh interrogative (Ross 1969, Takahashi 1994, Chung, Ladusaw, and McClokey 1995, Kizu 1998, Merchant 2001, Liu 2006, Wang and Wu 2006, Li and Wei, 2017 among others). Study of sluicing sentence involves several important aspects of syntactic theory including the identification of the nature of its grammatical status and its semantic interpretation. Zhang and Xu (2018) offers a unified account of sluicing sentence in Chinese and English from the perspective of predicative Empty Category, arguing that Chinese sluicing, just like its English counterpart, is also a grammatical form containing a predicative Empty Category, and that the contrast between two the languages mainly lies in the difference as where and how the derivational operations take place. It is noted in this article that one important issue still remains to be resolved regarding the similarities and differences between Chinese and English in sluicing sentence: What is retained after sluicing deleting in English is the wh-phrase only, but there must be a copular verb SHI, perhaps used as a Focus Marker (FM) here, going with the retained wh-phrase in Chinese sluicing sentence. E.g.,

(1) Somebody just left— guess who.  (Ross 1969)
   (COMPARE: Somebody just left— guess who just left.)
(2) Abby was reading, but I don’t know what.  (Merchant 2001)
   (COMPARE: Abby was reading, but I don’t know what she was reading)
(3) Youren ganggang likai – caicai shi shui.
   Somebody just left – guess SHI who
   “Somebody just left – guess FM who.”
   (COMPARE: Youren ganggang likai – caicai shi shui likai le)
(4) Ai bei zhengzai yuedu, danshi wo bu zhidao shi shenme.
   Abby just-now read, but I not know FM what
   “Abby is reading just now, but I don’t know what.”
   (COMPARE: Ai bei zhengzai yuedu, danshi wo bu zhidao ta shi zai du shenme)

In this article the above cross-linguistic contrast is recast as a by-product of an independent typological contrast between Chinese and English in focus device, which has nothing to do with either wh-phrase or interrogative (Cheng 1983, Xu 2001). As for focus device, a focus marker (copular verb SHI) is inserted before and as close as possible to a focused constituent in Chinese, no matter whether it is a wh-phrase or not, whereas the focused constituent moves to a sentence-initial position with or without an insertion of a focus marker in English.

Chinese: Focus Marker Insertion
(5) Zhang Xiansheng shi mai shenme?
   Zhang Mr FM buy what
   “What did Mr Zhang buy?”
Zhang Xiansheng shi mai na tao xin fangzi.
Zhang Mr FM buy that new house
“Mr. Zhang bought THAT NEW HOUSE.”

English: Focus-Fronting (+ Focus Marker Insertion in declarative)
(6) What will John buy t?
(7) It is the new house that John will buy t.

It can thus be seen obviously that the similarities and differences between Chinese and English in sluicing pattern perfectly with that between the two languages in focus device, we may thus generalize to say that superficial properties of sluicing in the above two languages have no independent theoretical status.

Chinese: Focus Marker Insertion
(9) Youren ganggang likai – caicai shui.
Somebody just left – guess FM who
“Somebody just left – guess who.”
(10) *Youren ganggang likai – caicai shui.
Somebody just left – guess who
Intended: “Somebody just left – guess who.”
(11) Youren ganggang likai – wo zhidao shi Zhang Xiansheng.
Somebody just left – I know FM Zhang Mr.
“Somebody just left – I know it is Mr. Zhang.”
(12) *Youren ganggang likai – wo zhidao Zhang Xiansheng.
Somebody just left – I know Zhang Mr.
Intended: “Somebody just left – I know it is Mr. Zhang.”

English: Focus-Fronting (+ Focus Marker Insertion)
(13) Somebody just left — guess who.
(14) Somebody just left – I know it is John.
(15) *Somebody just left – I know John.

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