

Wh-indefinites and their licensing conditions

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1 Introduction

This paper investigates the typology and semantics of *wh*-indefinites, i.e., indefinite expressions that share the same form with *wh*-interrogative words. The following examples from Korean illustrate that a *wh*-indefinite can have the exactly same form with a *wh*-interrogative word (2), or involve a certain additional morphology (3).

- (1) *Minho-ka mwe-lul mek-ess-ni?*¹
Minho-NOM **what**-ACC eat-PAST-Q²
'What did Minho eat?'
- (2) *Minho-ka mwe-lul mek-ess-ta.*
Minho-NOM **what**-ACC eat-PAST-DECL
'Minho ate something.'
- (3) *Minho-ka mwe-nka-lul mek-ess-ta.*
Minho-NOM **what-EX**-ACC eat-PAST-DECL
'Minho ate something.'

An immediate question raised by the above data would be if there is any difference between the two forms of *wh*-indefinites. The goal of this work is to answer this question, and for this purpose the paper mainly consists of two parts. The first part of the paper describes two different types of *wh*-indefinites in the world's languages and their different syntactic/semantic distributions, and reviews previous analyses to explain the behaviors of each type of *wh*-indefinites. The second part of the paper discusses *wh*-indefinites in Korean, which seems an apparent exception to the typology, and presents evidence that such data in fact do not contradict to the analyses presented in the first part. The typological implication of such a seeming exception and directions for future work will be discussed in the end of the paper.

¹ The Yale Romanization system is adopted for the transcription of the Korean data in this paper.

² The list of abbreviations used in this paper is as follows.

NOM: nominative, ACC: accusative, TOP: topic, FOC: focus, EX: existential,
PROG: progressive, PRES: present tense, PAST: past tense,
NEG: negation, DECL: declarative, Q: interrogative

2 Two types of *wh*-indefinites

In a number of languages, indefinite expressions share the same form with *wh*-interrogative words. I will call those expressions *wh*-indefinites in this paper. *Wh*-indefinites can be divided into two groups according to whether they have the same form with the interrogatives (bare-*wh* indefinites; BWIs henceforth) or a certain affix is attached to the interrogative form to explicitly mark an indefinite reading³ (complex *wh*-indefinites; CWIs henceforth). The lists in (4) and (5) provide examples of *wh*-indefinites that belong to each group⁴.

(4) Examples of BWIs

- a. *shenme* ‘what’ / ‘something’ (Chinese)
- b. *ti* ‘what’ / ‘something’ (Classical Greek)
- c. *was* ‘what’ / ‘something’ (German)
- d. *wat* ‘what’ / ‘something’ (Dutch)
- e. *čto* ‘what’ / ‘something’ (Russian)
- f. *mues* ‘what’ / ‘something’ (Korean)

(5) Examples of CWIs

- a. *nani* ‘what’ + *-ka* = ‘something’ (Japanese)
- b. *čto* ‘what’ + *-to* = ‘something’ (Russian)
- c. *mues* ‘what’ + *-nka* = ‘something’ (Korean)
- d. *ce* ‘what’ + *-va* = ‘something’ (Romanian)
- e. *irgend-* + *was* ‘what’ = ‘something’ (German)
- f. *ein-* + *hvað* ‘what’ = ‘something’ (Icelandic)
- g. *ne-* + *što* ‘what’ = ‘something’ (Serbian)
- h. *vala-* + *mi* ‘what’ = ‘something’ (Hungarian)

The above examples show that both types of *wh*-indefinites are widely observed in world’s languages. However, CWIs make a more common type of *wh*-indefinites than BWIs in that they appear in more number of languages (Haspelmath 1997). It has also been observed that BWIs occur in more restricted environments than CWIs. This section describes some cross-linguistically observed restrictions, and presents analyses to explain the different behaviors of BWIs and CWIs.

2.1 Restrictions on BWIs

³ The meanings of the affixes attached to the bare form of *wh*-words vary from language to language, and sometimes it is not even clear what they mean. I will not attempt to investigate the meaning of such affixes and will simply gloss them as EX (existential marker) in the examples in this paper.

⁴ Although the examples provided here are limited to the *wh*-indefinites with the meaning ‘something’ due to the limited space, languages with *wh*-indefinites usually have a complete inventory of interrogative-indefinite pairs. See section 3 for an example of Korean.

First, BWIs cannot appear in the beginning of the sentence, while CWIs and regular indefinites can (cf. Cheng 1991, Haspelmath 1997, Aldridge 2007). In the German sentence in (6), for example, the BWI *wer* appears in the end of the sentence. If it is located in the beginning of the sentence, the indefinite reading is not available. The only available reading of the sentence (7) is an interrogative reading ‘who is coming?’ Note that regular indefinites can appear in the beginning of the same sentence as shown in (8).

- (6) *Da kommt wer.*
 here came **who**
 ‘Someone is coming.’ (Haspelmath 1997: 171 (31))
- (7) **Wer kommt da.*
who came here
 ‘Someone is coming.’
- (8) *Jemand kommt da.*
someone came here
 ‘Someone is coming.’

Second, BWIs cannot be moved or scrambled out of their place, whereas CWIs and regular indefinites can (Postma 1994). In the Dutch example in (9), the sentence becomes ill-formed if the BWI *wat* is scrambled over the VP modifier ‘quickly’ (10). Again, regular indefinites can be scrambled in the same situation as shown in (11).

- (9) *Jan heeft snel wat opgeschreven.*
 John has quickly **what** written
 ‘John has quickly written down something.’ (Postma 1994: 193 (15))
- (10) **Jan heeft wat snel opgeschreven.*
 John has **what** quickly written
 ‘John has quickly written down something.’
- (11) *Jan heeft iets snel opgeschreven.*
 John has **something** quickly written
 ‘John has quickly written down something.’

Third, BWIs cannot take wide scope in general (Li 1992, Postma 1994, Yanovich 2005, Bruening 2007). For example, they cannot take scope over negation. The Chinese example in (12) can only mean that he didn’t eat anything, and cannot mean that there is a certain thing that he didn’t eat. However, such a wide scope reading is possible with CWIs, as illustrated in the Japanese example in (13)⁵.

⁵ In this sentence, a wide scope reading of the indefinite is actually strongly preferred. As we will see later, it supports the Choice Function Analysis of CWIs (cf. Kratzer 1998).

- (12) *Ta mei chi shenme.*
 he NEG eat **what**
 ‘He didn’t eat anything.’
- (13) *Kare-wa nani-ka-o tabe-nakatta.*
 he-TOP **what-EX-ACC** eat-NEG.PAST.DECL
 ‘He didn’t eat something.’

Fourth, BWIs cannot escape scope islands, while CWIs and regular indefinites can (Bruening 2007). As is well known, certain constructions do not allow quantifiers in them to take scope outside them. The sentence in (14) shows that an *if*-clause makes a scope island, since the quantificational expression *everyone* cannot take scope over *if*. However, an indefinite like *someone* can escape scope islands as in (15).

- (14) If everyone comes to the party, May will be happy.
 (15) If someone comes to the party, May will be happy.

When it comes to *wh*-indefinites, only CWIs can escape scope islands. The following examples illustrate that the BWI *shenme ren* ‘someone’ in Chinese cannot be interpreted outside of the *if*-clause, while the CWI *dare-ka* ‘someone’ in Japanese takes scope over the *if*-clause.

- (16) *Yaoshi shenme ren lai, Mei hui hen gaoxing.*
 if **what person** come Mei will very happy
 ‘If someone comes, Mei will be very happy.’
- (17) *Dare-ka-ga ki-tara Mei-wa sugoku yorokobu-daroo.*
who-EX-NOI come-if Mei-TOP very happy-will
 ‘If someone comes, Mei will be very happy.’

2.2 Interim Analyses

The syntactic and semantic restrictions on BWIs we have seen so far led a number of researchers of individual languages to the same conclusion that bare *wh*-words require a certain licenser to receive an indefinite reading. Those researchers have regarded a BWI as an e-type variable that is bound by existential closure at VP (e.g. Cheng 1991 for Chinese, Postma 1994 for German and Dutch; cf. Diesing 1992), or as an alternative set that should be bound by a certain lexical licenser such as modal operators (e.g. Yanovich 2005 for Russian, Dong 2009 for Mandarin Chinese; cf. Hamblin 1973). All of these analyses commonly assume that BWIs cannot be interpreted as an indefinite if they are not licensed properly, in which case the sentence is interpreted as either a *wh*-question or simply an ill-formed sentence.

Under this line of analysis, all the restrictions on BWIs mentioned in the previous subsection are explained naturally. Syntactically, BWIs must be located lower than their licensor, thus they cannot move over their licensor and also cannot appear in the beginning of the sentence from the first place. Semantically, BWIs must be interpreted in scope of their licensor, thus their scope configuration should be restricted. Note that according to this analysis, some of the restrictions of BWIs should not be as strict as previously described. First, not all movements should be illegal; movement to a position lower than the licensor should be possible. Second, a long-distance scope reading should be available as long as it is interpreted within the scope of the licensor. For instance, a modal expression such as *haoxiang* ‘It seems’ is a licensor of BWIs in Mandarin Chinese while universal quantifiers are not, thus a scope configuration such as [seem > some > all] is possible in the following example:

- (18) *Haoxiang tamen dou chiguo shenme.*
 seem they all ate what
 ‘It seems they all ate something.’

When it comes to CWIs, it would be natural to conclude that they have the same semantic representations with regular indefinites since those two kinds of indefinites pattern together. In fact, the semantics of regular indefinites that are not morphologically related to *wh*-words has been a subject of controversy, especially because of their relatively free scope configurations compared to canonical quantificational expressions. A number of researchers have attempted to explain the semantics of indefinites, and some relatively well-known analyses include the Choice Function Analysis (Reinhart 1997, Winter 1997, Kratzer 1998) and the Singleton Domain Analysis (Schwarzschild 2002). In the Choice Function Analysis, an indefinite introduces a choice function variable to the semantic representation of the sentence, which is existentially closed at some level (Reinhart 1997, Winter 1997) or remains free but its value is determined by the context (Kratzer 1998). In the Singleton Domain Analysis, indefinites that seem to take wider scope than other quantifiers are actually ‘singleton indefinites’ whose domain of quantification is contextually delimited to a singleton set.

Some previous researchers have adopted the Choice Function Analysis (e.g. Ha 2004 for Korean, Yanovich 2005 for Russian, Yatsushiro 2009 for Japanese) for the semantic representation of CWIs, suggesting that the additional morphology after the *wh*-word in CWIs is an explicit choice function marker. The details of the analysis may vary according to which specific choice function analysis is chosen, but it seems to me that the most suitable analysis of CWIs as choice functions is the one proposed by Kratzer (1998) in that it correctly predicts the relative scope configuration of negation and CWIs. According to Kratzer, a choice function indefinite necessarily has a wide scope reading since they are not bound by a local existential operator but contextually determined, and an apparent narrow scope reading becomes available when the choice function is

parameterized with an implicit argument against the other scope-bearing quantificational expression. Since such parameterization is impossible for negation, choice function indefinites cannot be interpreted in scope of negation. If CWIs are necessarily interpreted as choice function variables as the explicit morphology indicates, they are expected to scope over negation. Such expectation seems to be true, at least for the languages considered so far.

3 *Wh*-indefinites in Korean

In the previous section, we have seen the different distributions of BWIs and CWIs. Those differences are cross-linguistically observed, even within a language that has both types of *wh*-indefinites (e.g. see Yanovich 2005 for Russian data). Korean is one of the languages that have both types of *wh*-indefinites, as shown in Table 1.

<i>wh</i> -interrogative	BWI	CWI
<i>nwukwu</i> ‘who’	<i>nwukwu</i> ‘someone’	<i>nwukwu-nka</i> ‘someone’
<i>mwe</i> ‘what’	<i>mwe</i> ‘something’	<i>mwe-nka</i> ‘something’
<i>eti</i> ‘where’	<i>eti</i> ‘somewhere’	<i>eti-nka</i> ‘somewhere’
<i>encey</i> ‘when’	<i>encey</i> ‘sometime’	<i>encey-nka</i> ‘sometime’
<i>ettehkey</i> ‘how’	<i>ettehkey</i> ‘somehow’	<i>ettehkey-nka</i> ‘somehow’
<i>enu N</i> ‘which N’	<i>enu N</i> ‘some N’	<i>enu N-inka</i> ‘some N’

Table 1: The inventory of *wh*-indefinites in Korean

However, Korean makes an apparent exception to such typological generalization, since none of the restrictions described in the previous section is attested for its BWIs. This section introduces the data illustrating the exceptional case of Korean, and seeks a proper account of such examples.

3.1 Exceptional behaviors of Korean BWIs

In Korean, none of the restrictions presented so far holds for BWIs, and it seems that BWIs and CWIs simply pattern together. First, both BWIs and CWIs can appear in the beginning of the sentence:

- (19) *Mwe-ka ttang-ey ttelecy-ess-ta.*
what-NOM ground-to fall-PAST-DECL
 ‘Something fell to the ground.’
- (20) *Mwe-nka-ka ttang-ey ttelecy-ess-ta.*
what-EX-NOM ground-to fall-PAST-DECL
 ‘Something fell to the ground.’

Second, both BWIs and CWIs can be scrambled. In both examples shown below, the object *wh*-indefinite is scrambled over the subject.

- (21) *Nwukwu-lul Yuna-ka kkok manna-ko sipheha-n-ta.*
who-ACC Yuna-NOM really meet-want-PRES-DECL
 ‘Yuna really wants to see someone.’
- (22) *Nwukwu-nka-lul Yuna-ka kkok manna-ko sipheha-n-ta.*
who-EX-ACC Yuna-NOM really meet-want-PRES-DECL
 ‘Yuna really wants to see someone.’

Third, both BWIs and CWIs can take wide scope. The *wh*-indefinite can take scope over negation in both examples below.⁶

- (23) *Minho-ka mwe-lul an kacye-wa-ss-ta.*
 Minho-NOM **what-ACC** NEG bring-PAST-DECL
 ‘Minho didn’t bring something.’
- (24) *Minho-ka mwe-nka-lul an kacye-wa-ss-ta.*
 Minho-NOM **what-EX-ACC** NEG bring-PAST-DECL
 ‘Minho didn’t bring something.’

Fourth, both BWIs and CWIs can escape scope islands. The *wh*-indefinite can be interpreted outside of the *if*-clause in both examples below.

- (25) *Nwu-ka o-myen Yuna-ka cham cohaha-l ke-ta.*
who-NOM come-if Yuna-NOM very happy-will-DECL
 ‘If someone comes, Yuna will be very happy.’
- (26) *Nwukwu-nka-ka o-myen Yuna-ka cham cohaha-l ke-ta.*
who-EX-NOM come-if Yuna-NOM very happy-will-DECL
 ‘If someone comes, Yuna will be very happy.’

3.2 Proposal

The above examples seem to suggest that BWIs and CWIs pattern together in Korean. Thus, one might argue that the two types of *wh*-indefinites have an identical semantic representation in this language. Indeed, it has often been argued that Korean BWIs are merely a contracted form of the corresponding CWIs (C.-S.Suh 1989, D.-H.Chung 1996, Y.-J.Jang 1999, among others).

⁶ Ha (2004) argues that only CWIs can take wide scope in Korean, providing examples in which he claims that BWIs cannot scope over negation, other quantifiers, or *if*-clauses. However, almost every native Korean speaker I have consulted, including myself, did accept those examples with wide-scope BWIs. Furthermore, a perception experiment in Yun (2012) shows that a wide scope reading of BWIs is even preferred over a narrow scope reading if they are phonologically prominent than other elements in the sentence.

However, the distribution of BWIs and CWIs are not exactly the same in Korean. A BWI actually can appear in contexts where a typical non-restricted indefinite expression cannot appear. For instance, the BWI *nwukwu* ‘who/someone’ can occur in an exceptive phrase *X-pakkey eps-* ‘nobody but X’ (27), as a subject complement of the copular verb (29), or as an answer to the question ‘who are you talking about?’ (32). When a BWI is used in those contexts, the speaker has a specific person in mind and often presupposes the listener also knows that person, but does not want to mention the person’s name explicitly. Note that CWIs or regular non-restricted indefinites cannot be used in this way, as revealed by the unacceptability of the corresponding sentences with CWIs or their English translation with a regular indefinite *someone*.

- (27) *Ilen cis-ul hal salam-un nwukwu-pakkey epsta.*
 such thing-ACC do person-TOP **who**-FOC not.exist
 ‘No one but **a certain someone** would do such a thing.’
- (28) **Ilen cis-ul hal salam-un nwukwu-nka-pakkey epsta.*
 such thing-ACC do person-TOP **who-EX**-FOC not.exist
 ‘* No one but **someone** would do such a thing.’
- (29) *Pemin-un nwukwu-lako somwun-i ta*
 criminal-TOP **who**-be.that rumor-NOM all
na-ss-ta.
 spread-PAST-DEC
 ‘The rumor spread that the criminal is **a certain someone**.’
- (30) **Pemin-un nwukwu-nka-lako somwun-i ta*
 criminal-TOP **who-EX**-be.that rumor-NOM all
na-ss-ta.
 spread-PAST-DECL
 ‘*The rumor spread that the criminal is **someone**.’
- (31) A: *Cikum nwukwu yaykiha-nun*
 now who talk-PROG-Q
ke-ya?
 ‘Who are you talking about?’
- (32) B: a. *Nwukwu maliya, nwukwu*
who you.know **who**
 ‘**A certain someone**, you know.’
 b. **Nwukwu-nka maliya, nwukwu-nka*
who-EX you.know **who-EX**
 ‘**A certain someone**, you know.’

Based on these observations, I argue that there exist referential expressions that have the same form with *wh*-interrogatives in Korean, and that the seemingly exceptional scope reading of Korean BWIs is in fact due to their referential

homonyms. This approach is in line with the view that attributes the exceptional wide scope reading of certain genuine indefinites to their lexical ambiguity (cf. Fodor & Sag 1982, Kratzer 1998).

Our lexical ambiguity analysis of BWEs is further supported by the observation that the occurrences of BWIs are in fact not entirely free in Korean. Note that although referential expressions do not take scope, their interpretation is truth-conditionally compatible with a widest scope reading of indefinites. Thus, our analysis predicts that the non-canonical occurrence of BWIs can only have a widest scope reading when they co-occur with other scope-taking elements.

The following examples show that this prediction is borne out.

First, BWIs cannot be interpreted in scope of other quantifiers when they escape syntactic islands. In the sentence in (33), which has three scope-bearing elements, the BWI can take either narrowest scope [many > if > **some**] or widest scope [**some** > many > if] but not an intermediate scope [*many > **some** > if]. On the other hand, the sentence in (34) allows all the three scope configurations for the CWI *mwe-nka* ‘something’.

- (33) *Manhun salamtul-i mwe-lul mek-umyen*
 many people-NOM **what**-ACC eat-if
alleyluki-lul ilukhinta.
 allergy-ACC occur

‘Many people show allergic reaction if they eat something.’

- (34) *Manhun salamtul-i mwe-nka-lul mek-umyen*
 many people-NOM **what-EX**-ACC eat-if
alleyluki-lul ilukhinta.
 allergy-ACC occur

‘Many people show allergic reaction if they eat something.’

Second, BWIs necessarily have a wide scope reading when they are scrambled. In the previous scrambled examples, repeated below, the sentence with the BWI only has a wide scope reading that Yuna wants to see a specific person (35), while the one with the CWI allows a narrow scope reading (36).

- (35) *Nwukwu-lul Yuna-ka kkok manna-ko sipheha-n-ta.*
who-ACC Yuna-NOM really meet-want-PRES-DECL

‘Yuna really wants to see someone.’

- (36) *Nwukwu-nka-lul Yuna-ka kkok manna-ko sipheha-n-ta.*
who-EX-ACC Yuna-NOM really meet-want-PRES-DECL

‘Yuna really wants to see someone.’

This observation might be hard to disentangle from a general wide scope preference in the scrambled position, as a wide scope reading is strongly preferred

even in the sentence with a CWI in (36). However, it becomes clearer when we consider a context that forces a narrow scope reading of an indefinite. Suppose that there is a dispute in some area and every country dispatched someone to mediate. The most natural reading is that each country dispatched different people. In such a case, BWIs cannot appear in the scrambled position (37), while CWIs can (38).

- (37) **Nwukwu-lul motun nala-ka phakyenhay-ss-ta.*
who-ACC all country-NOM dispatch-PAST-DECL
 ‘Every country dispatched someone.’
- (38) *Nwukwu-nka-lul motun nala-ka phakyenhay-ss-ta.*
who-EX-ACC all country-NOM dispatch-PAST-DECL
 ‘Every country dispatched someone.’

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that there are two types of *wh*-indefinites, namely BWIs and CWIs, and that their different behaviors are attributed to their different semantic representations. Although Korean BWIs seem to behave in the same way with CWIs at first glance, a closer scrutiny reveals that they are not entirely the same, and that Korean BWIs make an apparent typological exception due to their referential homonyms.

Before closing this article, let us consider a remaining question: is Korean the only language whose BWIs are lexically ambiguous? Are there any other languages in which referential usage of BWIs are found? The answer seems positive⁷, and I leave it for future research to explore more languages. Another interesting usage of BWIs worth mentioning with regard to this question is a so-called placeholder usage. Ganenkov et al. (2010) report that in certain Northeast Caucasian languages such as Udi and Agul, *wh*-pronouns can be used as placeholders, i.e., “hesitation markers whose use is motivated by production difficulties on the side of the speaker.” In such a case, the speaker knows that there exists a specific expression but cannot recall it at the moment of utterance so that he or she replaces the expression with a *wh*-pronoun. Such a usage of *wh*-words provides additional evidence that non-interrogative readings of bare *wh*-words are not homogeneous in certain languages⁸. The versatility of bare *wh*-expressions deserves further exploration.

⁷ I appreciate Anastasia Giannakidou, Peter Graff, and Oana Lungu for suggesting the possibility of non-canonical BWIs in Greek, German, and Romanian, respectively.

⁸ See also Cheung (2011) for the placeholder usage of Cantonese *wh*-expressions.

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