

**M-zi ‘not-know’ in Cantonese as an epistemic marker**

**Background.** A broad theme of this study is to investigate how the speaker’s knowledge is encoded in natural languages. In addition to the widely studied area of (epistemic) modal auxiliaries, studies reveal that a family of indefinites systematically encodes speakers’ ignorance (or failure of identification) (a.k.a. *epistemic indefinites*, following Alonso-Ovalle & Menéndez-Benito 2015).

**Proposal.** (i) The negated predicate *m-zi* ‘not-know’ in Cantonese develops into an epistemic marker that simultaneously serves as an overt binder of a *wh*-indefinite (Kuroda 1965, Cheng 1991). Precisely, a *m-zi-wh* string denotes a specific indefinite encoding the speaker’s ignorance. (ii) *M-zi wh* represents a special member in the family of epistemic indefinites that contrasts with Spanish *algún* w.r.t. the anti-singleton constraint (Alonso-Ovalle & Menéndez-Benito 2010), and with French *un ... quelcoque* ‘a(n) ... or other’ w.r.t. free choice interpretation (Jayez & Tovená 2006).

**Argument for (i).** In (1a), *m-zi* non-canonically appears in a post-verbal but pre-nominal position, one that is unavailable to any other predicates. (1b) suggests that the *m-zi* forms a constituent with the following *wh*-element, as it can be substituted by a ‘one-CL-NP’ nominal. Crucially, (1a), unlike (1b), *cannot* be felicitously continued by a follow-up utterance that encodes speaker’s knowledge, as in (2a) and (b), a characteristic

- (1) a. Aaming taai-zo    **m-zi**    bin-bun-shu    b. Aaming taai-zo    jat-bun-shu  
 Aaming read-PERF not-know which-CL-book    Aaming read-PERF one-CL-book  
 (Lit.) ‘Aaming read not-know which book.’    ‘Aaming read one book.’  
 (2) a. zikhai    Hunglaumung    b. gu-haa hai bin-bun  
 namely Dream.of.the.red.chamber    guess be which-CL  
 ‘Namely, Dream of the Red Chamber.’    ‘Guess which book it is.’

**Argument for (ii).** (3) shows that the domain of quantification of *m-zi* can be a singleton set, as indicated by *zeoi* ‘most’ in the relative clause. It further suggests that the referent, while being unique, cannot be identified in a *relevant* way (i.e. only the property but not the title of the book is identified, cf. Aloni & Port 2015). Despite a unique referent, (4) suggests it is not a definite nominal, or (4) would be contradictory (cf. Dawson 2018). The second conjunct also indicates that *m-zi wh* does not interact with negation and enjoy mandatory wide scope. (5a) suggests that a *m-zi wh* nominal is compatible with episodic contexts, unlike a free choice item *jamho* ‘any’ in (5b). As such, a *m-zi wh* nominal is best characterized as a specific version of English *a certain* NP that requires the speaker’s failure of identification of the referent in a discourse-relevant way.

- (3) Aaming maai-zo    **m-zi**    bin-bun    cyun    syudim    zeoi    gui    ge    syu  
 Aaming buy-PERF not-know which-CL whole bookstore most expensive GE book  
 (Lit.) ‘Aaming bought not-know which book that is the most expensive one in the bookstore.’  
 (4) Aaming tai-zo    **m-zi**    bin-bun-syu,    daan    mou-tai    **m-zi**    bin-bun-syu  
 Aaming read-PERF not-know which-CL-book, but not.have-read not-know which-CL-book  
 (Lit.) ‘Aaming read not-know which book, but did not read not-know which book.’  
 (5) a. Aaming camjat    maai-zo    **m-zi**    bin-bun-syu    me    b. \*Aaming camjat    maai-zo    jamho    jat-bun-syu    me  
 Aaming yesterday buy-PERF not-know which-CL-book Q    Aaming yesterday buy-PERF any    one-CL-book Q  
 (Lit.) ‘Did Aaming buy not-know which book yesterday?’    ‘Did Aaming buy any book yesterday?’  
 ≈ ‘Did Aaming buy a book that is unknown to me yesterday?’

**Discussion.** *M-zi* appears to be an overt counterpart of a choice function (Kratzer 1998, Reinhart 1998, i.a.) that binds a *wh*-element, playing a role similar to other possible binders such as *dou* ‘all’ and *mou* ‘not.have’. The current study highlighted a less-discussed interpretation of *wh*-elements in Chinese. Also, (6) shows that *m-zi* can also combine with a *wh*-adverbial, which usually gives rise to an emotional colouring of exaggeration instead of ignorance. Such colouring follows from a specific indefinite analysis in the sense that *m-zi-gei* suggests there exists a specific degree s.t. Aaming runs as fast as that degree. Since degree is a scalar notion, the speaker implies with an unidentified degree that it is beyond his/her imagination, hence exaggeration.

- (6) Aaming pao-dak    **m-zi-gei**    faai  
 Aaming run-RESULT M-ZI-how fast  
 ‘Aaming runs VERY fast (I don’t know how fast).’