

## English Lexicon in Mandarin A-not-A Questions:

*Nǐ [m] bù understand?*

### Abstract

The goal of this study is to explain how a borrowed word gets Chinese-ified and then integrated into the preferred structure, reduplicating only the first syllable rather than the whole word, of a Chinese A-not-A question. Because Chinese speakers prefer to use the syllable rather than the whole word when constructing an A-not-A question, when they code-switch within the same structure, rather than borrow entire word directly, they break it down and make the word “Chinese-ified” as long as the “break-down” is within the domain of Chinese syllabic structure.

The Chinese A-not-A question type has been widely discussed syntactically as well as semantically in the literature including Cheng’s (1984), Zhu’s (1985), and Yuan’s (1993) studies on its relationship with other question-types and its categorization, its usage in pragmatics (Li & Thompson, 1997; Cheng, 1984; Yuan, 1993), its formation (Li & Thompson, 1981; Tang, 1981; Huang, 1988; Dai, 1990; Hsiao, 2004). Scholars have approached the constructions of this type of question in different ways. Traditionally, Li and Thompson (1981) and Tang (1981) believe that an A-not-A question is constructed through the coordination of the affirmative form and its negative counterpart and that this type of question is derived from disjunctive questions. However, Huang (1988) argues that this analysis violates the principle of lexical integrity, which accounts for why, while the object of a verb-phrase can be topicalized, the object of a verb-object cannot. Since the principle of lexical integrity states that coordinate deletion cannot delete the sub-part of a lexical word, it seems that deleting part of a word can violate the principle of lexical integrity. Hence, deleting the *xīn*-part in *xiǎo-xīn*, “careful” clearly violates such a principle; the sentence, however, is a grammatical sentence in Chinese. Therefore, Huang (1988) proposes that A-not-A questions are actually generated by a morphological word formation rule: partial reduplication. Hsiao (2004) further claims that the copied material in an A-not-A question is actually a syllable rather than a morpheme.

Specified by Chao (1968) and Ross and Ma (2006), one of the features in Chinese is that each syllable is associated with a meaning, unlike English, in which most of the syllables do not need to contain individual meaning. In traditional American structuralist linguistics (Bloomfield, 1933), *morpheme* is defined as the “minimal meaningful element”. In Chinese, a word may contain several morphemes, but the meaning of every single morpheme may not contribute the meaning of the word, as demonstrated in (1). Therefore, the disyllabic word, in fact, is the “smallest

meaning unit” to itself. Therefore, in a sentence like (2a), a syllable, rather than a morpheme, is copied to satisfy phonological priority among most native speakers. This priority explains why a native speaker would prefer sentence (2a) over (2b). Because syllables but not morphemes are copied, it is safe to assume that because the meaning is communicated by the second predicate within the context, the meaning of the sentence is already clear to the listener, and the repetition can be omitted. Therefore, one can account for how the sentences in (3) are recognizable as long as the listeners have knowledge of such a lexicon and understand the characteristics of an A-not-A question. The question still remains: How can an English word such as *happy* be Chinese-ified in (3a)?

In Chinese, each character corresponds to one syllable, which in English can be part of a word (“let” + “tuce”) or an entire word (“hot”). Chinese syllables consist of three elements: initial sound, final sound, and tone. Compared to English, Mandarin Chinese has a relatively simple syllabic structure. The basic sequence of consonants and vowels in a Chinese syllable can be represented as (C1)V(C2), where V denotes an obligatory vowel, and the initial consonant C1 and the final consonant C2 are optional (Hsu, 2002). Furthermore, in the case of (C1)VC2, the consonantal endings of closed syllables are limited to the nasal sound and the retroflex. In the construction of an A-not-A question, a native speaker of Chinese prefers to reduplicate the first syllable of a disyllabic word. Therefore, although in English, instead of syllabifying the word to [hæ] and [pi], [p] appears not only in the coda of the first syllable but also in the onset of the next, in Chinese, ending with a vowel is the preferred option. Hence, a Chinese speaker will have no problem syllabifying *happy* into [hæ] and [pi]. By the same token, a Chinese speaker can treat an English word such as *happy* as a two-syllable Chinese word made up of [hæ] and [pi], integrating the word into an A-not-A question formation as seen in (3a). The first syllables in *understand* and *agree* both qualified to be good Chinese syllables; thus, the A-not-A questions in (3b) and (3c) are acceptable.

My intention here is to try to propose a step-by-step explanation on how the English lexicon integrates into the Chinese A-not-A formation as elaborated in (4). I then propose that any word that can be syllabified within the domain of a Chinese syllable sequence is a perfect candidate to fill in, or to be code-switched, in an A-not-A question. Words from any language are suitable for integration into A-not-A questions if, and only if, such words can be analyzed and tested by Chinese syllable sequences.

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**Data & References**

- (1) a. 你 馬 不 馬虎 ?  
*Nǐ mǎ bù mǎ-hū?*  
You (horse) not careless  
“Are you careless?”
- b. 你 快 不 快樂 ?  
*Nǐ kuài bú kuài-lè?*  
you (fast) not happy  
“Are you happy?”
- (2) a. 你 快 不 快樂?  
*Nǐ kuài bú kuài-lè?*  
You (fast) not happy  
“Are you happy?”
- b. 你 快樂 不 快樂  
*Nǐ kuài-lè bú kuài-lè?*  
You happy not happy  
“Are you happy?”
- (3) a. *Nǐ [hæ] bù happy?*  
You not happy  
“Are you happy or not?”
- b. *Nǐ [ʌn] bù understand?*  
you not understand  
“Do you understand or not?”
- c. *Nǐ [ə] bù agree?*  
You not agree  
“Do you agree or not?”
- (4) Example:  
你 怕 不 怕?  
*ni3 pa4 bu2 pa4?*  
a) afraid [əfreɪd]  
b) *Ni3* afraid *bu4* afraid?

- c) [ə] and [frei] → V  
 d) Ni3 [ə] bu4 afraid?  
 You afraid not afraid  
 “Are you afraid or not?”

Example:

- 他的 家 溫(馨) 不 溫馨?  
 ta1-de jia1 wuen1 bu4 wuen1-xin1  
 a) homey [həmi]  
 b) ta1-de jia1 homey bu4 homey?  
 c) [hən] and [mi] → CV-[+nasal]  
 d) ta1-de jia1 [hən] bu4 homey?  
 he DE house homey not homey  
 “Is his house homey?”

Example:

- 你 聰 不 聰明?  
 ni3 cong1 bu2 cong1ming2?  
 a) smart [smɑɹt]  
 b) Ni3 smart bu4 smart?  
 c) [si] and [mɑɹt] → [si]: CV - /i/ **insertion to become an open syllable**  
 d) Ni3 [si] bu4 smart?  
 you smart not smart  
 “Are you smart?”

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