Modality and rhetorical questions in Late Archaic and Early Middle Chinese: a syntactic account

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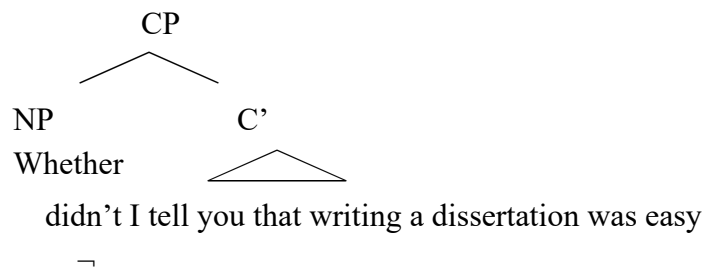National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan
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Negation and rhetorical questions, i.e. polarity contexts, have been proposed traditionally as typical environments for the diachronic development of modals of possibility into deontic or epistemic modals in Late Archaic and Early Middle Chinese. (e.g. Peyraube 1999, Li 2001: 89, Liu 2000, Meisterernst 2008, 2020). In this presentation, we will concentrate on rhetorical questions with adverbial *wh*-words, and their possible impact on a change in the reading of these modals from circumstantial to deontic. For the analysis of the adverbial *wh*-words we use the cartographic approach following Tsai (2008); the analysis of the modals is based on a proposal in (Cormack and Smith 2002), adapted for LAC and EMC in (Meisterernst 2020), according to which modals are divided by a Polarity Phrase into Mod$_1$ in the TP layer, expressing deontic modality, and Mod$_2$ in the lexical layer, expressing circumstantial modality. We will show that although all possibility modals regularly appear in rhetorical questions, the modals display different tendencies in acquiring a deontic reading in correspondence with their basic semantics. In order to account for the special impact the polarity of a rhetorical questions has on the reading of the proposition, we propose a high Polarity Phrase in addition to the low PolP, which switches the polarity of the proposition from question into strong assertion following Han (1998, 2002). Rhetorical questions imply an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked (Han 1998, 2002). Meisterernst (2018) following Han (2002: 219) proposes a covert negative operator in CP to map onto negative polarity.

(1)　a. Didn't I tell you that writing a dissertation was easy?

　　　b.

　　　c. ¬ [¬ (I told you that writing a dissertation was easy)]

　　　d. I told you that writing a dissertation was easy. (cf. Han 2002: 219).

In combination with possibility modals, the resulting reading in a rhetorical question can be strong negation of a possibility in a positive rhetorical question NEG[POSSIBLE, or the expression of necessity NECESSARY[NOT. The high PolP is in agreement with the low PolP, in which the adverbial *wh*-phrase is hosted at PF, to the effect that the adverbial *wh*-word functions as an overt polarity marker which binds the Q operator in C.

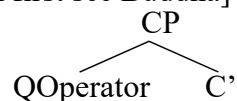(2)　a. 我是女人。何由得先見佛。　　(*Taisho* 51, 2085, p. 859c)
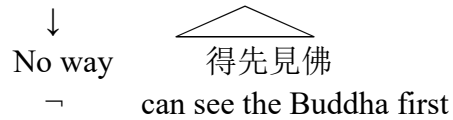　　　*Wǒ　shì　nǔrén　héyóu　dé　　xiān jiàn fó*
　　　I　　COP　woman　how　　DE　　first　see　Buddha
　　　'I am a woman, how could I see the Buddha first?' → I am not able (according to my disposition …

¬∃x[pro x can first see Buddha] = NEG [POSSIBLE that I first can

　　　b.

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↓   ⌒

No way   得先見佛

¬   can see the Buddha first

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In the discussion, we will analyze the three central possibility modals of Late Archaic Chinese *kě* 可, *néng* 能, and *dé* 得 and their interaction with *wh*-words in rhetorical questions. We will demonstrate that the polarity head only switches the illocutionary force from question to assertion, but it does not necessarily force a change from circumstantial to deontic reading; i.e. an interpretation of the modal in Mod_1P instead of Mod_2P. The *wh*-word functions as an indefinite quantifier mapping onto negation, and switching the interrogative mood into a strong assertion. For the rhetorical questions we propose a higher projection in CP, which can be spelled out as ForceP or as high PolP (Meisterernst 2018); the Q-operator in PolP switches the polarity of a positive question into a negative assertion and vice versa. The *wh*-operator moves up to the Q-operator in Pol_1P, where it maps onto negation in a rhetorical question. Adverbial *wh*-words are hosted in Pol_2P at PF, i.e. in a position overtly preceding Mod_2. A deontic reading, when available, can be pragmatically implied by the strong assertion reading of the rhetorical question depending on the basic semantics of the modal.

References:

Cormack, Annabel, Smith, Neill. (2002). Modals and Negation in English. In Sjef Barbiers, Frits Beukema, and Wim van der Wurff (Eds.), *Modality and its Interaction with the Verbal System, Linguistik Aktuell 47 / Linguistics Today 47* (pp. 133-162). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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