

## *Original Paper*

# Semantic Features and Pragmatic Functions of Alternative Question in Mandarin Chinese

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### ***Abstract***

*Through the analysis of the definition and syntactic form of alternative question in Mandarin Chinese, the semantic features and relationships of its internal elements are abstracted. In its typical syntactic structure “(是) A 还是 (or) B”, there are two types of options A and B, namely real options A and B which belong to the same category, and virtual ones created by the speaker in context. Based on this, the alternative question is classified. Its usage characteristics and usage scenarios are summarized by analyzing the example sentences of both conventional and unconventional new emerging usage in BBC corpus. At last, its five pragmatic functions are concluded, namely providing options, expressing speculation, expressing strong emotions, emphasizing and creating demand.*

### ***Keywords***

*alternative question, semantic feature, pragmatic function*

## **1. Introduction**

Alternative question (AltQ, for short), as one type of interrogative questions, has received a substantial amount of attention from a wide range of perspectives. On semantics and syntax perspective, Maria Biezma (2015) focused on the three components of AltQs, namely questions, disjunction and intonational meaning/focus, as themes and put forward some emerging consensus (Biezma & Rawlins, 2015). On pragmatics perspective, Patricia Trainor (1980) induced a rule of presupposition carrying in alternative questions (Trainor, 1980). Irene Koshik (2005) researched AltQs used in conversational repair (Koshik, 2005). Some researches focus more on application of AltQs. ROBERT O. HERRMANN (1998) compared AltQ forms for assessing consumer concerns (ROBERT, ARTHUR, & REX, 1998). Peter V. Miller (1984) investigated AltQs forms for attitude scale questions in telephone interviews (Miller, 1984). Charles W. Kreidler (1963) studied the AltQ as a teaching device (Kreidler,

1963). As for the AltQs' researches in different languages, we found limited literature. Minpyo Hong (2020) investigated AltQs in Korean mainly through their prosody and denotation (Hong, 2020). Eun Hee-So (2005) conducted a study on AltQs in a book *Wulun Quanbei Yanjie*, which is an important oral Chinese textbook in the 18th century during the Li Dynasty on the Korean peninsula, and is also a required book for the first and second examinations of the imperial examinations of the Li Dynasty (Eun, 2005). Eun Hee-So's research is about AltQs in Chinese language, but his research scope and examples are confined to only one textbook, which cannot provide a comprehensive view for AltQs in Mandarin Chinese. In order to make up for this shortcoming, this paper will take the BBC corpus as the sources of example sentences to analyze AltQ from lexical, syntactic and pragmatic perspectives of Mandarin Chinese based on the conventional and unconventional new emerging usage in people's daily life, in the hope that people will have a comprehensive and new understanding of the AltQ in Mandarin Chinese.

## 2. Definition and Syntactic Form of AltQ

AltQs are one of the main types of questions that appear in natural language, together with polar ("yes/no") questions and constituent ("wh") questions in English (Biezma & Rawlins, 2015). While in Mandarin Chinese, according to the different ways of asking questions, the interrogative questions are divided into four categories, namely polar questions, constituent questions, positive and negative questions, and alternative questions. So we can see, both English and Chinese or other languages have AltQs. So what's the definition of AltQ? Mauri (2008) defined the alternative relation as the speaker's intent, in using a disjunctive construction to convey a set of substitutable possibilities (Mauri, 2008). The Chinese explanation of AltQ is almost in the same way, by illustrating that the AltQ is to connect two or more possibilities to be chosen with "(是).....还是(or)....." or "(是).....还是(or).....还是(or).....", and ask the respondent to choose one of them as an answer (Liu et al., 2001). The AltQs appear twice in the latest *Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education* (2021). First, it is as a grammar point in the HSK1 level, and example sentences (1) & (2) are provided as follow. Second, in the "How to ask questions" section of the HSK level 1 language point, using "还是(or)" to ask questions is a separate questioning method, that is, AltQ (2021).

(1) 你爸爸是老师还是医生? Is your father a teacher or a doctor?

(2) 你们坐火车去还是坐飞机去? Do you go by train or by plane?

In terms of syntactic components, an AltQ can ask the subject, predicate, object, or clause. If asking about the subject or the whole sentence, use "是(is)" and "还是(or)" before the two clauses. Sentences (3) and (4) are examples.

(3) 是你去, 还是他去? Did you go, or did he go?

(4) 是你去送还是他来接? Did you send it away or did he pick it up?

The syntactic structure in sentences (3) and (4) are respectively "(是) S1 V or S2 V", "(是) + clause 1 +

还是(or) + clause 2”。In other cases, “是” is placed after the subject, such as example (1) & (2). At this time, the syntactic structure is “S (是) + option 1 还是(or) option 2”. Because this article focuses on the relationship between two or more options, the difference between the syntactic form before and after the subject is not reflected in the structure, and the form of the AltQ is generally simplified to “(是) A 还是(or) B”. The AltQ with three or more options is logically the same as the one with two options, so this paper will not list it as a separate formal structure for research.

Syntactically, options A and B can be two nouns or noun phrases, pronouns, verbs or verb phrases, and clauses. Generally, it is a neat and symmetrical juxtaposition structure, such as example (1) & (2). But in everyday use, the same part of syntactic components of the options can be omitted for the sake of expressive economy. For example, in example (5), options A and B have changed from the original co-ordinated concatenative structure to co-ordinated nouns. It can be seen that the AltQ is very flexible in expression.

(5)你们坐火车还是飞机? Do you take the train or the plane?

### 3. Internal Semantic Relationships of AltQs

In the AltQ structure “(是) A 还是(or) B”, according to the authenticity of options A and B, there are two categories of real options A and B and virtual options A and B.

The premise that options A and B can enter into the AltQ is that they are members of the same category, forming a juxtaposed alternative relationship. For the investigation of this category, it can be examined from the horizontal parallel relationship and the vertical relationship. The horizontal relationship is the juxtaposed relationship between members within the same category, and the vertical relationship is the vertical belonging relationship. In the vertical relationship, a diamond-like structure is formed from the most general category to the most specific category. There are only a few members in the most general and most specific categories, but there are a large number of members in the intermediate category which is between the top category(general category) and the end(specific category), which makes the vertical relationship shape like a diamond. In this hierarchical structure, the more abstract it is, the fewer the category members it has. The intermediate category with the most members is the basic level category. The general level category above it is called the upper category, and the specific level category below it is called the lower category.

#### 3.1 Real Options A and B which Belong to the Same Category

There are real options A and B, and they belong to the same category. The different semantic relations between the two lead to different semantic representations of AltQs and different pragmatic functions.

3.1.1 Options A and B are any two things or behaviors in the same category, which appear clearly and form a juxtaposed relationship. The categories belong to the same level, either the basic level category, or the upper category or the lower category. This is the most common structural form of AltQs.

(6) 老俩口金婚, 老头问老伴: “要玫瑰花还是巧克力?” (都属于礼物范畴)

The old couple are going to celebrate their Golden wedding anniversary, and the old man asked his wife, "Would you like roses or chocolates?" (both belong to the category of gifts)

(7) 16 岁应该是上初中还是高中? 上高二有可能吗? (都属于学习阶段范畴)

Is a 16-year-old student in junior high school or high school? Is it possible in the second year of high school? (both belong to the category of learning phase)

(8) 这个是年收入还是月收入? (都属于收入范畴) Is this an annual income or a monthly income? (both in the category of income)

(9) 大家一起决定下~是烤橘子还是蒸橘子还是炒橘子? (都属于烹饪范畴) Let's decide together~ Will us roasted, steamed or fried it? (all in the culinary category)

(10) 各位帮我看看, 是棕色好还是米色好? (都属于颜色范畴)

Help me to have a look, is brown or beige better? (both in the color category)

3.1.2 Option A is a clear and definite thing or behavior, but option B is a vague and uncertain thing or behavior of the same kind, which is juxtaposed with A. At this time, the AltQ is used to indicate speculation. A is the first option that the speaker can think of when mentioning an event and to a large extent he has a positive attitude towards this option. That is to say, A is the first option that can be remembered by the speaker. The speaker is certain about this to some extent, but not 100% sure. So he adds option B to form an AltQ, which provides other options to choose from, making the language expression more relaxed and precise.

(11) 是失眠了还是怎么的??? 瞌睡都还没来。

Is it insomnia or something??? Doze hasn't come yet.

(12) 现在高中了却非常讨厌。日子浑噩, 是我变了还是怎样?

Now I'm in high school but feel very annoying. The days are hazy, have I changed or what else?

(13) 王, 您尽管吩咐、这视频我怎么没看过?? 是我火了还是??!! Wang, instruct your orders, why haven't I watched this video?? Do I become an overnight celebrity or??!!

### 3.1.3 Options A and B are Two Opposite Things or Actions in the Same Category

In semantics, antonymy is the technical term for oppositional relationship, and it has three main subcategories: hierarchical antonymy, complementary antonymy, and reverse antonymy (Hu, 2007). Hierarchical antonyms are hierarchical, and the properties expressed by the members of each pair of antonyms are the difference in degree, and the denial of one is not the affirmation of the other. The members in complementary antonyms are complementary to each other, and they completely divide a semantic domain into two halves. The negation of one is the affirmation of the other, and the affirmation of one means the negation of the other. The members of the reverse anti-sense relationship do not constitute positive and negative opposition, but only represent a reverse relationship between two entities. It is typically manifested in opposing social roles, like kinship, time and space relationships, etc. In this sense, it is also called relationship opposition.

Options A and B can be in a hierarchical antonymy relationship, such as example (14); they can also be

complementary antonymous things or behaviors, such as example (15)-(17), or artificially and subjectively put options A and B against each other to form a strong contrast, such as example (18)-(19). AltQs generally focus on asking for information. However, some AltQs are based on context, and it can be inferred that they focus on expressing one of them, with strong emotions, and have pragmatic functions of rhetorical questioning and contrast, such as example sentences (20)-(22).

(14) 这是好事还是坏事? IS IT GOOD OR BAD?

(15) 你看那小孩, 长的不男不女的, 你说他到底是男孩还是女孩? Look at that child, he looks neither male nor female, do you think he is a boy or a girl?

(16) 科学还是伪科学? Science or Pseudoscience?

(17) 谁告诉我, 我是继续还是放弃? Who told me, should I continue or give up?

(18) 这是圈套还是机会? IS IT A TRAP OR OPPORTUNITY?

(19) 男人们, 你是选才女还是美女? Men, do you choose talented women or beautiful women?

(20) 你到底是天使还是魔鬼? ? ! 现实生活还不够折磨人, 还跑到梦里折磨。Are you an angel or a devil? ? ! Real life is not enough to torture me, but also to torture me in dreams.

(21) 发现周围好多同学都整容了, 我也该整了吗? 真正该整的到底是我们的脸还是心? I found that many students around me have plastic surgery, should I do it too? Is it really our face or our heart that should be rectified?

(22) 最大的虐杀团体绝不是个人, 就是这些因为利益所驱使的猫贩子狗贩子, 你们做什么生意不好, 非要做这些伤天害理的事! 你们没想过下辈子是去天堂还是地狱吗? ! ! ! ! ! The biggest massacre group is by no means an individual, they are these cat and dog dealers who driven by profit, many kinds of business you can do, why did you do these wicked things? Have you ever thought about whether you will go to heaven or hell in your next life? ! ! ! ! !

(23) 等三小时都快冻成冰棍了, 你是化妆啊还是画皮啊? (=我觉得你不是在化妆, 而是在画皮。表达我的强烈不满。)

After waiting for three hours, I'm almost frozen into a popsicle. Are you wearing makeup or painting skin? (=I think you are not wearing makeup, but painting skin. Express my strong dissatisfaction.)

Such alternative questions are also often used in news headlines. By using homophony to express strong feelings, in fact, the questioner already has the answer in mind. In this case, the alternative question is equivalent to the rhetorical question. At the same time, it can also attract readers and arouse curiosity to pay attention to follow-up content, such as example sentences (18), (24)-(25).

(24) 治病(Chinese pronunciation:zhìbìng)还是致命(Chinese pronunciation:zhìmìng)? Cure or lethal?

(25) 要房子(Chinese pronunciation:fángzi)还是王子(Chinese pronunciation:wángzi)? 要衣服(Chinese pronunciation:yīfu)还是幸福(Chinese pronunciation:xìngfú)? Want a house or a prince? Want clothes or happiness?

3.1.4 Options A and B are completely consistent things or behaviors, which apply the syntactic form of an alternative question, but are not actually in an alternative relationship, but expressing emphasis,

which is similar to the usage of repetition. Because there is only one option in the alternative question. Only one option means no need to make choice. The situation where A and B are completely consistent is an unconventional usage, which is highly subjective and expresses strong emotions such as helplessness and playfulness. In the structure “是 A 是 A 还是 A?(Is it A, A or A?)”, it seems that there are several options in the form, but in fact there is no choice needed to be made. The answer has long been preset in the speaker’s mind, and it is an extremely positive expression. Through the innovative form of interrogative sentences, the expression form is fresh and playful, and it expresses emphasis through repetition.

(26) 刚刚友人微信我才知道这没下限的事情，饭岛你到底是怎么想的！这事儿我是骂还是骂？（这事儿真该骂。） I just learned from my friend on WeChat that there is no lower limit for this thing. What the hell do you think, Iijima! Am I scolding or scolding about this? (This thing should be scolded.)

(27) 肚纸没来由的疼了一晚上，晚饭都木有吃，现在好饿好饿，老妈猛劝我吃饭，我是吃呢还是吃呢还是吃呢？（我真想大吃一顿，但有些矜持、俏皮。） The stomach hurts for no reason all night, and I didn’t even have dinner. Now I’m so hungry. My mother urged me to eat. Should I eat or should I eat? (I really want to eat a lot, but express my thought a little reservedly and playfully.)

(28) 互称先生很有爱。挖先生，这是赞美呢还是赞美呢还是赞美呢？（这一定是赞美。） Calling Mr. mutually is very loving. Mr. Dig, is this a compliment or a compliment or a compliment? (It must be a compliment.)

(29) 很辛苦的睡了很久，醒过来发现才 2 点半，车厢的大爷大妈各种呼噜声让姐抓狂，忍不住开机想刷个豆瓣，结果发现 EX 用别人的手机短信过来，问我最近过得怎样!!!你到底是有病呢还是有病呢，管那么宽！小兄弟。（你真是有病！） After sleeping hard for a long time, I woke up and found that it was only 2:30. The grunts of the uncles and aunts in the carriage drove me crazy. I couldn’t help turning on the phone and wanted to view Douban (a website), but found that my EX boyfriend was texting me from someone else’s mobile phone. He asked me how I’ve been doing recently?!!! Are you sick or are you sick? You have a finger in every pie, little brother! (You are really sick!)

(30) 妖精你明天是要热舞还是要热舞还是要热舞啊？ Fairy, are you going to dance or dance tomorrow?

(31) 和 W 相约各自出发去同一地方会合就餐.....Taxi 就别指望了，那我是开车呢还是开车呢 .....还是开车..... (不能指望打的，只能开车去，无奈。)

Meet with W and go to the same place for dinner... Taxi, don’t count on it, then should I drive or drive... or drive. . . (I can’t expect to take a taxi, but can only drive. So helpless.)

(32) 这闷热的天啊.....洗完澡，我是复习呢还是复习呢还是复习呢.....看话剧吧.....

This sultry day... After taking a shower, should I review or review or review... Let’s watch the drama...

(33) 我发布的微博共影响了 146 万人次。你们都没有送我一个超智障的苹果哈哈 kitty 衬衫！是

该骂呢还是该骂呢?? (你真是该骂。) My Weibo posts have affected a total of 1.46 million people. You didn't send me a hello kitty shirt! Should I scold you or not?? (You really should be scolded.)

(34) 七点起床的我精神奕奕, 想喝胡辣汤! 我是出去喝还是出去喝 还是出去喝呢? 学到八点就出去! (我非常想出去喝胡辣汤, 我再坚持一会儿就去喝。) I woke up at seven in good spirits and wanted to drink spicy soup! Do I go out for a drink or out for a drink or out for a drink? Go out at eight o'clock! (I really want to go out and drink spicy soup, and I will drink it after a while.)

### 3.2 Virtual Options in the Real Context: Options A and B Created

3.2.1 There were no options originally, but the speaker created option A and B spontaneously for the respondent to choose, which presupposes the preconditions that the respondent needs option A or B. By asking an AltQ, the speaker creates the respondent's needs and attracts the respondent's attention.

Context 1: The child walks past a balloon stand, and the hawker says, “小朋友, 你要红色的还是蓝色的? (Little boy, do you want a red balloon or a blue one?)”

Context 2: You walk past a vegetable stall, and the hawker yells at you, “新鲜的土豆, 来看看, 来一斤还是两斤呢? (Fresh potatoes, come to have a look, one pound or two?)”

Such scenarios use AltQs to preset the respondents' subjective willingness to buy, and then further provide options for respondents to choose on this basis. This is the application of the principle of consistent commitment of psychology, and is a positive psychological suggestion, which belongs to the communication strategy of the speaker. From the perspective of pragmatics, the semantic structure of sentences includes three different types of semantics: assertive meaning, implicational meaning and presuppositional meaning. The presuppositional meaning is the background meaning hidden in some words or structures in the sentence, which is the basis for the construction and understanding of the sentence meaning, and the starting point for the expression. Interrogative sentences can trigger premises. The premise is one-way, concealed and subjective. The so-called one-way, refers to that the premise is made unilaterally by the speaker (He & Chen, 2004). Subjectivity means that the premise itself is not necessarily true or correct. The premise can be an objective fact, or it can be a fact in the mind of the speaker, or it can refer to a hypothetical situation. Concealment is that the premise is concealed from the original sentence, not explicitly stated. The hawkers in the above contexts take advantage of the subjectivity and concealment of the premise, hide the uncertain elements through the premise, and make respondents fall into the trap of choosing one or the other directly by answering AltQs.

### 3.2.2 Create Virtual Answers in Real Contexts

#### 3.2.2.1 One of the Options is a Virtual Option

(35) A: “你喝牛奶还是咖啡?” B: “牛奶。” A: “还没买呢。” (Jiang et al., 2014) A: “Do you drink milk or coffee?” B: “Milk.” A: “I haven't bought it yet.”

#### 3.2.2.2 The Answer is not in the Options Provided, but Reconstructed.

(36) 弟弟发短信: “姐姐, 我想养个宠物。” “小鸟还是金鱼?” “我想养大象!” 我的表情唯有汗

颜!

My young brother texted to me: “Sister, I want to have a pet”. “A bird or a goldfish?” “I want to have an elephant!” How awkward I feel!

The dialogue in Example (35) above is from the texts of authoritative TCSL textbook *HSK Standard Course 3*, which is quite humorous. This dialogue provides a virtual option, creating a humorous discourse atmosphere. In Example (36) the answer to the dialogue is not among the options offered, which delivers a sort of unexpected feeling. The pragmatic function of AltQs in this context is to create surprises and humor.

#### 4. The Characteristics and Scenarios of the Usage of AltQs

Polar questions and positive and negative questions are simple for the respondent, because only a direct yes or no answer is enough. Specifically, the constituent question is relatively open and broad. To answer it, the respondent needs more in-depth thinking and provides more information. As for the AltQ, the respondent only needs to choose one of the given options to answer, and the information required to be provided by respondent is between the polar question and the constituent question. If we take the exam question types as an example, polar questions are similar to judgment questions, AltQs are similar to multiple-choices questions, and constituent questions are similar to short answer questions, and the requirements for the respondent are gradually increasing. The AltQ tends to stimulate the respondent thinking more than polar questions. At the same time, it is also more moderate. By providing choices, it is easier to answer than constituent questions.

The typical usage for an AltQ is to provide options to choose from. But in real life, the AltQ has developed a lot of pragmatic functions beyond its typical usage. The following are scenarios of its innovative usage:

##### 4.1 Create Demand

Originally there was no demand, but an AltQ was asked based on a hidden semantic presupposition that there exist two options, and the respondent must choose one of the two, by which it creates a demand. The creating demand usage is often used in sales scenarios and parenting communication.

##### 4.2 Emerging New Usage

One emerging new usage is that all options are the same in the AltQ. This kind of usage borrows the structure form of AltQ, but in fact there are no choice needed to be made, since only one option is provided. Through the new usage, the speaker hopes to express emphasis through repeated forms, which can make the communication playful, humorous and lovely.



## 5. Pragmatic Functions of AltQs

### 5.1 Provide Options

This is the basic and normal pragmatic function of AltQ, by which the speaker provides options and the respondent chooses from the options provided by the speaker. Both the speaker and the respondent are confined to the limited information, which is the most time-saving and labor-saving for both parties and conforms to the principle of communication.

### 5.2 Express Speculation

When option A is a certain thing or person and option B is not, the focus of semantic expression is on option A. The speaker is quite certain about option A to a certain extent, but not completely sure, so that he has to find an option B paralleling with option A to show his uncertainty, which makes the expression more rigorous, accurate, and gentle, and can also play a modal role to some extent.

### 5.3 Express Strong Emotions

When options A and B are completely opposite things or behaviors in the same category, strong emotions are added to the AltQ on the basis of its conventional usage. Through the strong comparison of options, some AltQs express the connotation and emotion of rhetorical questions, and have a certain subjectivity, which makes the emotions expressed by the whole sentence, such as helplessness and happiness, more full and abundant.

### 5.4 Emphasize

Emphasis is achieved by recurring when two options are exactly the same. In essence, there is no second option, so no choice is needed to make. It is a way of expressing attitudes and emotions, expressing emphasis, and it belongs to the unconventional and innovative use of language.

### 5.5 Create Demand

For the speaker, AltQs are semi-closed, showing the options he can provide (some are real options, some are fake or virtual options), which reduces the difficulty of answering, and the respondent's answer is always within the speaker's expectation. For the respondent, he feels that he has choices to make which let him feel he is respected and his personality needs such as self-esteem are met. He is provided with some information, so he is supposed to give back some information to the counterpart.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the definition and syntactic form of AltQ, the semantic features and relationships of its internal elements are abstracted. The two options connected by the disjunction can be subject, predicate, object or clause in structure forms. The two options belong to the same category, the same level with a juxtaposed relationship, which is the most typical structural form of AltQs. Besides this, there are also some special cases. For example, option A is a clear and definite thing or behavior, but option B is a vague and uncertain thing or behavior of the same kind. Option A and B can also be two opposite things or actions in the same category to form a strong contrast with strong

emotions, forming a rhetorical question. We also have virtual options in the real context, which don't exist originally, but are created spontaneously and intentionally by the speaker, then lead the respondent to choose, which presupposes the preconditions that the respondent needs option A or B. By asking an AltQ, the speaker creates the respondent's needs and attracts the respondent's attention. We also have new emerging usage which is very popular among young people. In the new usage, option A and B are completely consistent things or behaviors. The speaker borrows the syntactic form of an AltQ, but does not actually offer choices, but expresses emphasis, which is similar to the usage of repetition.

Based on the above analysis, the AltQ in Mandarin Chinese is classified, its characteristics and scenarios of usage are summarized, and its five pragmatic functions are concluded, namely providing options, expressing speculation, expressing strong emotions, emphasis and creating demand.

Note: The above examples are all from the BCC corpus (except example 35).

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