1 Indefinites

1.1 Indefinites and interrogatives

The basic observation

Indefinite pronouns (*somewhere*) very often have a shape that is similar or identical to the shape taken by the interrogative pronouns (*where*).

(1) a. šúka ki tákú yaxtáka he
dog the what bite Q
‘What did the dog bite?’
‘Did the dog bite something?’

b. šúka ki tákú yaxtáka
dog the what bite
‘The dog bit something.’

Ultan (1978) in a typological survey found 77 of his sample 79 languages had this connection. Haspelmath (1997) (in a better balanced survey) found 63 of his 100.

Kannada

(2) a. raju ellige ho:da
Raju where went
‘Where did Raju go?’

b. raju ellig-o: ho:da
Raju where-or went
‘Raju went somewhere.’

c. raju ellig-u: ho:d-a:nu
Raju where-also go-may
‘Raju may go anywhere.’
What is the relationship?

Why this indefinite–interrogative affinity? Is the part they seem to have in common being used in two different places? Or is it two different things that happen (and have a tendency to) sound similar/identical?

Maybe they both signal an “information gap.” Interrogative: inability to provide the information (Who stole my bike?); indefinite: either inability or unwillingness (Someone stole my bike).

One is more complex?

Perhaps one is more complex than the other. Who left the door open? seems to presuppose someone left the door open—so, perhaps who is something plus some additional bit of meaning, like ‘I’m asking a question.’

The problem with that is that morphologically, it always seem to go in the other direction.

(Hasepmlath 1997: 26–27)

...clearly the majority of the world’s languages have interrogative-based indefinite pronouns. Thus there is a universal asymmetric markedness relation such that indefinite pronouns are usually more marked than and derived from interrogative pronouns. This asymmetry is sometimes neutralized (in languages like Khmer), but it is virtually never reversed.

**Esperanto**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Esperanto</th>
<th>interrogative</th>
<th>indefinite</th>
<th>negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>person</td>
<td>kiu</td>
<td>iu</td>
<td>neniu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thing</td>
<td>kio</td>
<td>io</td>
<td>nenio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>property</td>
<td>kia</td>
<td>ia</td>
<td>nenia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>place</td>
<td>kie</td>
<td>ie</td>
<td>nenie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>kiam</td>
<td>iam</td>
<td>neniam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manner</td>
<td>kiel</td>
<td>iel</td>
<td>neniel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...natural languages that are structured like Esperanto in this respect are virtually unattested. I am not aware of a clear case in which an indefinite pronoun is formally unmarked with respect to a marked interrogative pronoun. With respect to its indefinite pronoun system Esperanto is thus probably not a possible human language. (Hasepmlath 1997: 25)
Opposite direction?

Bhat (2004) is skeptical of it going the other direction (something = what + extra bit) because the ‘extra bit’ is often the same as a conjunctive (‘and’) or disjunctive (‘or’) particle, as in Kannada. “What could be the semantic or functional explanation for this derivation?” asks D. N. S. “How is it that a question about an unknown entity changes into a statement about it when the notion of conjunction or disjunction is added to it?”

Haspelmath kind of stops there, suggesting that they’re not formed one from the other, but are essentially two different things that sound the same. Bhat (cf. also Kratzer & Shimoyama (2002)) suggests that they differ in something like agreement, where one is the “indefinite form” and the other is the “interrogative form” but neither is built from the other.

Indefinite pronouns vs. interrogative pronouns

So, Bhat (2004) is suggesting that what differentiates “wh-words” from “indefinite pronouns” is nothing to do with the things themselves, but rather to do with the fact that one is in questions and the other is in statements. They’re both “information gap” that can agree in form based on the environment in which they find themselves.

(3) mki-sh hav-ii
someone-Subj enter-Int
‘Who came in?’

(4) mki-sh hav-sh
someone-Subj enter-Perf
‘Someone entered.’

Where they’re just different

In some languages, there just isn’t a relationship between the two. Like in Ainu. Or in English, partly (someone and anyone vs. who).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interrogatives</th>
<th>Indefinites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hunna</td>
<td>‘who’ nen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hīta</td>
<td>‘what’ nep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hunak</td>
<td>‘where’ nei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hempara</td>
<td>‘when’ nei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mak</td>
<td>‘how’ neu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interrogative?**

People often call, e.g., Lakhota táku, an interrogative pronoun—that can sometimes be used as an indefinite. Bhat suggests that the question particle takes care of the interrogation, and that the táku is just an indefinite all the time. Intonation is sometimes the only marker of interrogativity.

(5) zheli que-le shenme
    here miss-ASP what
    (i) ‘There is something missing here.’
    (ii) ‘What is missing here?’

(6) awa o-’ut
    who 3-come
    (i) ‘Who is coming?’
    (ii) ‘People are coming/someone is coming.’

**Moving**

Marking what the interrogation is about can happen either morphologically or by moving it to the front (most common).

(7) a. tís ēithen?
    who came
    ‘Who came?’

b. ēithén tis
came who
‘Someone came.’

(8) a. Wer kommt da?
    who comes there
    ‘Who is coming?’
b. Da kommt wer there comes who ‘Someone is coming.’

Question marking
Often languages will use a special particle somewhere, along with the interrogative pronoun, in questions. Often same one in yes-no and wh-question functions. Bhat (2004) gives a long list of such languages. Wintu ((w)i), Ika (-e, -o, no), Assuriní (pa), Carib (ko), Sanuma (no glottal stop at the end), Hausa (length + low tone), Grebo (epsilon, a on verb), Mapun, Wararo, Mapuche, Cantonese, Godoberi, Jaqaru, Epena Pedee, Bagirmi, “and several others.”

(9) (1a) šúka ki táku yaxtáka he
dog the what bite Q
‘What did the dog bite?’
‘Did the dog bite something?’

(1b) šúka ki táku yaxtáka
dog the what bite
‘The dog bit something.’

a. šúka ki igmú wà yaxtáka he
dog the cat a bite Q
‘Did the dog bite a cat?’

Interrogative mood
Some languages mark the verb in a way Bhat calls “interrogative mood” (I’m not sure why Grebo wound up in the previous list, rather than here). So, Koasati, Central Alaskan Yupic, Tauya, Cubeo.

Actually, also unclear to me how to distinguish question particles from interrogative mood in SOV languages—perhaps we can say that it has to do with how close we are to the verb stem.

Japanese, particle not mood?

(10) Taroo-ga hon-o kaimasita.
Taro-NOM book-ACC bought.POL
‘Taro bought a book.’
(11) Taroo-ga hon-o kaimasita ka?
Taro-NOM book-ACC bought.POL Q
‘Did Taro buy a book?’

(12) Taroo-ga nani-o kaimasita ka?
Taro-NOM what-ACC bought.POL Q
‘What did Taro buy?’

(13) Taroo-ga nani-ka-o kaimasita.
Taro-NOM what-Q-ACC bought.POL
‘Taro bought something’

Particles on the indefinite
Another set of languages has an interrogative particle, but it seems to land on
the pronoun. Southeastern Pomo, Yaqui, Assuriní, Lele, Waaø, Sinhala, Nivkh,
Ngiambaa.

(14) hita-sa kari weče-k
which-Q house fall-REALIZED
‘Which house fell down?’

Sinhala, particle, mood?

(15) Chitra potɨ gatta.
Chitra book-INDEF bought
‘Chitra bought the book.’

(16) Siri ee potɨ gatta də?
Siri that book bought Q
‘Did Siri buy that book?’

(17) Siri mokak də gatte?
Siri what Q bought-E
‘What did Siri buy?’

(18) Siri mokak də gatta.
Siri what Q bought
‘Siri bought something.’
Other devices

Focus in various forms is often the way questions are differentiated from statements—putting the questioned word in a focus position (the front of the sentence, or elsewhere, like right before the verb), or marking it as a focus using morphology, or putting it in a cleft (Where is it that you went?).

Interim thoughts

If this is the right way to look at it, the glosses that people often use for wh-words in languages might be misleading. Perhaps what (English) is not the same thing as nani (Japanese) at some deep level, insofar as what maybe contains something extra that Japanese lacks. (Cf. Sinhala)

Things to say here. Many of these things will simply be said aloud in class without being marked here on the handout, as I’m running out of time.

1.2 Other combinations, semantic maps

Other kinds of indefinites

Another point: indefinites as a kind of NPI. (Mandarin is like this as well)

(19) a. Kho su mthong yod ma red
    he who see AUX not AUX
    ‘He didn’t see anyone.’
    Tibetan

    b. Kho su mthong pa red
    he who see PAST AUX
    ‘Who did he see’
    *‘He saw someone’

Tibetan

(20) a. Khyodra-s Norbu mthong gyung ngas?
    you-ERG Norbu see AUX Q
    ‘Did you see Norbu?’

    b. Khyodra-s su mthong gyung ngas?
    you-ERG who see AUX Q
    ‘Did you see anyone?’
c. Khyodra-s su mthong pa red?
   you-ERG who see PAST AUX
   ‘Who did you see?’
   *‘You saw somebody.’

Other particles

(21) (2b) ra:ju elig-o: ho:da
   Raju where-or went
   ‘Raju went somewhere.’
(2c) ra:ju elig-u: ho:da:nu
   Raju where-also go-may
   ‘Raju may go anywhere.’

(22) a. dare-mo-ga kita.
    who-MO-NOM came
    ‘Everyone came.’

b. John-ga hon-mo zassi-mo katta.
    John-NOM book-MO magazine-MO bought
    ‘John bought both books and magazines.’

Sinhala

(23) a. Chitra kauru-t ekkø kataa kɔlaa.
    Chitra who-T with talk did
    ‘Chitra talked with everyone.’

b. Ranjit kaurun-tu=t gaehuwa
    Ranjit who-DAT-T hit
    ‘Ranjit hit everyone.’

(24) miniha mokak-vat gatte naæ.
    man(def.) what-T took-E NEG
    ‘The man did not take anything.’

(25) miniha mokak do gatta.
    man(def.) what Q took
    ‘The man took something.’
Sinhala

(26)  

a. mon㎝ha hari dann㎝ha.
what hari know
‘(I) know something (and I’m not going to tell you what it is).’

b. # mon㎝ha do₂ dann㎝ha.
what Q know
‘(I) know something (but I can’t remember what).’

Lining up functions

The connection between mo and ka is like the connection between t and hari, and can be said to make a certain amount of semantic sense—insofar as disjunction could be said to be at the heart of existential quantification, and conjunction of universal quantification. Also, questions for that matter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form polar question</th>
<th>Form alternative question</th>
<th>Sinhala</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form wh-question</td>
<td>Form specific indefinite from wh-word</td>
<td>do₂</td>
<td>ka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form disjunction</td>
<td>Form nonspecific indefinite from wh-word</td>
<td>hari</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form universal quantifier from wh-word</td>
<td>‘also’ when suffixed to a noun ‘both...and’ when forming a coordination</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>mo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form NPI from wh-word (under negation)</td>
<td></td>
<td>vat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Haspelmath’s implicational maps: English
References