Typology of NIPs (Idiatov 2007)

For purposes of cross-linguistic comparison, ‘who?’ and ‘what?’ are best defined as idealizations resulting out of the interaction between several parameters within a single conceptual space, as in Fig. 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual space for delimiting the prototypical functions of NIPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENTITY TYPE</th>
<th>PERSON</th>
<th>THING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TYPE OF REFERENCE</td>
<td>IDENTITY-1</td>
<td>IDENTITY-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPECTED ANSWER</td>
<td>WHAT</td>
<td>WHAT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Integrative pronominal

The prototypical interrogative ‘who?’ is an interrogative pronominal asking for the identification of a person and expecting a proper name as an answer.

The prototypical interrogative ‘what?’ is an interrogative pronominal asking for the classification of a thing and expecting a common noun as an answer.

The combinations of values [person + identification + proper name] and [thing + classification + common noun] are prototypical combinations of values with respect to the choice of a non-prototypic selective interrogative pronominal.

What to do with non-prototypical combinations of values? (cf. Fig. 2)

use ‘who?’, as in Kgalagadi (1), Russian (2)

c. use ‘what?’, as in English (3-3)

c. use something else, as in Hausa (3), which is an avoidance strategy

Kgalagadi (Niger-Congo; Bantu S30; Botsowana; Kena Monaka, p.c.)

(1) [A.] Lhêbêhe le leheho le ke mopeli [B.] Kê Húbbu ‘name of place this is who is Hukuru ‘(it) who? ‘the name of this place?’

Russian (Paul Newman, p.c.)

(3) Jep / Veya / Yepa ‘name of 2 SG / who / name of 2 SG’

And what (lit.: ‘who?’) is he actually? A doctor?

Hausa (Paul Newman, p.c.)

(2) ‘A en jis ‘doctor’? Doktor?’ and he whom actual doctor

Typology of NIPs & non-human animals

Non-human animals fall in between persons and prototypical things (concrete biologically nonliving objects). In questions, most languages tend to assimilate them to things rather than humans opting for ‘what?’; as in (4) both in Alawa and English.

Alawa (Maran, Australia; Margaret Sharpe, p.c.)

(4) Ngiqini-e gaîtwey nyanũ ahaŋ han ‘someone walks into a room with a swelling on his arm, a wound or whatever. A’ What hit you?

A small minority of languages uses ‘who?’ assimilating non-human animals to humans as regards the use of NIPs, as in (5) and (6).

Russian


Kathmandu Newar (Sino-Tibetan, Tibetobo-Buman, Nepal, Kasuyo Kimyo, p.c.)

(6) Chanta wàt, ñàt? wakû. 2SG.DAT WHO-ERG.3SG.MIND ‘[Looking at a wound on someone’s arm presumably caused by an animal bite] What hit you?’

Particularly important numbers of languages with ‘who?’ in questions about non-human animals:

- Algonquian languages in North America
- Carib & Tucanoan languages in South America
- Eastern Bantu languages in Africa
- Slavic languages in Europe
- Yeniseian languages in northern Asia
- presumably, various non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern Australia

However, in both languages with ‘what?’ and languages with ‘who?’, the in-between status of non-human animals is still manifested indirectly in that many languages are reported to tend to avoid using ‘who?’ and ‘what?’ in questions about non-human animals, as in (7), especially in certain constructions, as in (8).

Danish (Allen et al. 2003:195)

(7) [An animal must have made these tracks.] a. Hvem / Hvad er det? b. Hvad er det for? ‘What is it? who / what is it for one’

Russian

(8) [An animal must have made these tracks.] a. Kë / Cë who / what this animal ‘What is this animal?’ b. Cë / wat for animal ‘What is this animal?’ c. Cë / wat ‘Who this’

Map 1. Languages allowing ‘who?’ in questions about non-human animals

Map 2. Languages with special NIPs for non-human animals

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Goals

- To examine the cross-linguistic variation in the use of non-selective interrogative pronouns (NIPs), such as English ‘who?’ and ‘what?’, in questions about non-human animals, i.e. non-human biologically living entities.
- The focus is on languages using ‘who?’ or a special NIP for non-human animals:
  - their geographical and genetic distribution
  - possible correlations with other manifestations of the animacy hierarchy in these languages
  - the ways grammatical animacy in the context of a question may differ from grammatical animacy elsewhere in the grammar of such languages.

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Map 2. Languages with special NIPs for non-human animals

Several languages have been found to use special NIPs for non-human animals.

Animacy correlations

Languages with ‘who?’ or special NIPs in questions about non-humans animals normally have gender systems based (at least in part) on animacy:

- with a special animate gender, as in Trio or Tucano
- with a special animate subgender, as in Russian
- with an emergent gender system with an animate agreement class, as in Kathmandu Newar

The few exceptions can mostly be accounted for:

- by loss of gender, as in Lezgi
- by contact, as in Estonian (with Russian) or Hadza (with Eastern Bantu)

Animacy in NIPs and elsewhere

In NIPs, animacy tends to be manifested in a more restricted way than elsewhere:

- not all entities denoted by nouns that are grammatically animate can be questioned with ‘who?’; as in (10), although e.g. sakizâ ‘mosquito’ belongs to the animate gender

Southwestern Ojibwa of Ponte Lake, Minnesota (Algonkian, Algonquin, Ojibwa, USA; Schwartz & Dunnigan 1986:304)


- in languages with special non-human animate NIPs, humans are grammatically animate

In NIPs, animacy assignment tends to be less fixed than elsewhere:

E.g., in Russian all nouns belong to either the animate subgender or the inanimate one. Roughly speaking, the distribution is humans & fauna vs. the rest. As a rule of thumb, the NIPs kô ‘who?’ and çò ‘what?’ are distributed similarly, but in practice there are many complications, such as:

- the larger the animal the more likely it is that kô will be used rather than çò
- çô tends to be used with mammals and çò with birds, reptiles and especially fish and insects. However, when insects, etc. act on humans (e.g. when they sting or bite), çô will normally be used
- çò may be preferred to kô if the animal is perceived as unpleasant, repulsive, etc., and on the contrary, kô may be preferred if the animal is nice or pleasant in some way
- if the animal is perceived as food çò may be preferred to kô