

Pragmatic uses of *mekai* ‘what (thing)’ constructions in Chaozhou and other Sinitic languages

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Pragmatic functions for *mekai* constructions in Chaozhou

- indefinite pronoun
- interrogative pronoun
- Indefinite list-extender
 - e.g. 'and such things' or 'et cetera'
- placeholder for unutterable or taboo words
- negative attitudinal marker

Mekai as an indefinite pronoun

- (1) *ler aiN tsiak mekai to ho*
2SG want eat what.CL all good
'You can eat **whatever** you like.'

Mekai as an interrogative pronoun

- (2) *kimzek tsiak mekai?*
today eat what.CL
'**What** are we eating today?'

Mekai ~meser ~mehng
as an interrogative pronoun

(3) a. *ler aiN mekai?*
2SG want what.CL
'**What (objects/things)** do you want?'

b. *ler aiN meser/mehng?*
2SG want what(-matter)
'**What** do you want **to do**?'

Or: 'What do you want?'

(say, in a confrontational situation)

Mekai as an indefinite list-extender

- (4) *Tiotsiu hai tsiN tsoi si,*
Chaozhou sea(food) fresh many extremely
($<$ die, to the death)
lenghe mekai, tsiak kao ler ui k'er
lobster what.CL, eat till 2SG afraid go
- ‘Chaozhou has such an awful lot of seafood,
such as lobsters, **etc.** You will be sick of eating
seafood.’

***(hia) mekai* as a placeholder
or a socially unutterable expression**

(5) *i tek hia mekai ma*
3SG obtain that-kind-of what.CL SFP
'She is suffering from **that sort of thing**
(= cancer).'

- It is still a pronoun as it replaces 'cancer'.

***Hia mekai ~ hia mehng* as an adjective
(often with a perjorative reading)**

(6) *i kai siang hia mehng kai*
3SG COP most that-kind-of what-matter
SFP

‘He/She is **that kind of most X person.**’

(e.g. X= greedy, fussy, difficult, etc.,
depending on the context)

Seng mekai as a negative attitudinal marker

(7) *i sioN taN u tsiN u si*
3SG think that have money have power
tsu ho meser haN? Seng mekai?
then can what-matter PRT count-as what.CL

‘He thinks that he can **do anything** (< ‘do
whatever’)

because he has money and power?

He is **nothing/nobody**.’

(lit. ‘What does he amount to?’)

A rhetorical question with the meaning:

***Bo/U mekai + ADJ as an interrogative pronoun
(often with a negative attitude)***

(8) ***u mekai ho toiN?***

have what.CL good see?

‘There is nothing good /interesting to see/watch.’

Lit. ‘**What good/interesting thing** is there to see/watch?’

- Can have a dismissive tone.

***U mekai* + ADJ as an interrogative pronoun
(often with a negative attitude)**

- (9) *tsia kai u me(kai) ho tsiak*
this CL have what(CL) good eat
'**How can** this be **that tasty/good to eat?**'

Mekai as an indefinite pronoun

(xx) *i* *tsu* *kio* *A* *Zi* *Kou* *e*
3SG then call PREF Second Auntie PRT

A *Zi* *Kou* *tsu* *k'iok* *ko* ***mekai***
PREF Second Auntie then take CL what.CL

k'ek *l* *tsiak* *a* *k'iok* *ko* ***mekai*** *k'ek* *i* *ma*
give 3SG eat or take CL what.CL give 3SG PRT

‘She then called out ‘Second Auntie’, and Second Auntie then took **something** for her to eat or gave her **something**.’

Mekai ~ mehng as an indefinite pronoun

(xx) *i her t'au muek tsuangsiu au si aiN*
3SG that CL thing renovate after COP want
*tso paiNkong a si **meheN** no*
do office or COP what.matter SFP (= I think)

After he renovates that thing (= house), he wants
to use (it) as an office or **something else, I think.**'

Mekai ~ mesur as indefinite pronoun

(xx) *uaN* *ts'o* *hiaNti* *long* *to* *tsio* *keioN*
1PL.GEN CL.PL brother all LOC this.CL Jieyang

uaN ***mesur*** *long* ...
1PL.GEN what.matter all ...

'Our brothers are all in Jieyang;

whatever happens to us, they will all (be here).'

Mekai ~ mesur as indefinite pronoun

(xx) *ua taN mesur a?*

1SG say what.matter PRT

i taN bo bo, bo mesur ma

3SG say NEG.have NEG.have NEG.have what.matter SFP

p'ak saN kai tiang long bo nang tsi

make three CL call all NEG.have people take

'I asked, "**What's the matter?**" (> "What happened?")

He said, "Nothing, nothing, **nothing (important).**"

I made three calls, but no one answered."

Mekai as an indefinite pronoun

(xx) *ua tsiN t'ang e saikai tsiaN lai a*
1SG this.time go a.little.while world then come PRT
'I will go ease myself first.'
(‘go make the world’ is a euphemism for ‘going to the toilet’)

mai kuang neng mekai
NEG.want care 2SG what.CL
'I don't care **what** you **are doing**.'

Mekai as indefinite pronoun

- (xx) 我個想頭談許 ta 老人 Long 等tue 得阿妹呢嫁 k'er ,
暫暫得所以利用這個時間，給我空間我愛做物個就做物個

ua kai sioNt'au taN hia ta lau nang long
1SG CL idea say then PRT old people all

tengtue tek a mue li ke k'er
wait.on PERF PRT younger.sister PRT marry PERF

tsiam tsiam tek soyi lieng tsi kai sikang k'ek ua
just just PERF so use this CL time give 1SG

*k'ongkang ua aiN tso **mekai** tsu tso **mekai***
space 1SG want do what.CL then do what.CL

'My idea is that, well, I have finished waiting on my parents (i.e. they are gone), and the younger sister (= my younger daughter) has got married. I should then have some space (free time) to myself so that I can do **anything (< whatever)** I like.'

Mekai as an interrogative pronoun

(xx) *zik boi tsu zik boi le*
Twenty eight then twenty eight PRT
“Ok, she is 28.”

mekai a?
what.CL PRT

‘**What** (were you talking about)?’

bo, taN oh Au kai tsaukiaN zik boi
NEG.have say PRT PN POSS daughter twenty eight
‘Nothing. (I) was saying, oh, the daughter of Ao is 28 years
old.’

Mekai as an interrogative pronoun

- (xx) A: 你做你喫kau 飽
ler tso ler tsiak kau pa.
2SG do(as.you.wish) 2SG eat till full
'You can take as many as you like.'
- B: 物個?
mekai?
what
'What?'
- A: 喔，嗰許藥丸
O ko hia iok iN
DM those that.kind.of medicine ball
'Oh, (I was telling her to take) those medicine pills.'
[But they were actually talking about eating peanuts.]

Mekai ~ meser as interrogative pronoun

(xx) A: 你愛物事?
ler aiN meser?
2SG want what.matter?
'**What** do you want?'

加水?
kia tsui?
add water
'Add more water?'

我來倒
ua lai to
1SG come pour
'I will do it.'

Me(kai) ~ mesur as interrogative pronoun and *me(kai)* as interrogative determiner

(xx) A: 你 to 做物事?
ler to tso mesur?
2SG PROG do what.matter?
'**What** are you doing?'

Interrogative
pronoun

B: 我 to 畫個圖形
wo to ue kai touheng
1SG PROG draw CL pattern
'I am drawing a plan (of the house).'

A: 畫個物圖形?
ue kai me touheng?
draw CL what pattern?
'**What kind of plan** are you drawing?'

Interrogative
determiner

Mekai as an indefinite pronoun

(xx) contd.

非常實際個加非常有美感，非常簡單 物個 to long meng 個

huisioN sekji e ka huisioN u mui gum
very practical PRT and very have beauty feeling

*husioN kangtuaN **mekai** to long meng kai*
very simple what.CL PRT all no.need SFP

‘It (the plan drawn) is very practical, and very appealing;
(it is) very simple, (so you) don't need **anything** else
(done to the house).’

Mekai as a list-extender

(xx) *pou ts'iang nang nang tsia niang geng*
cloth factory people people know fetch money

mekai i tsu
what.CL 3SG then

‘(She) is known by everyone in the textile factory.
(She is in charge of folks) getting their wages
and things like that.’

Mekai as a list-extender

(xx) *gnou la bo nang kio*
five also NEG.have people call
“Nobody is called the Fifth One (in the family)”.

kio tso miang mekai

call as name what.CL

‘(People) call the Fifth One (in the family)
by his (proper) name **and such** (instead).’

Mekai as a list-extender

(xx) *kiang tsiN mekai tsu kai i muek*
donate money what.CL then for 3SG do

zu tse

beautiful SFP (= tentative.marker)

‘If it is about donating money, or **things like that**,
then (they) try to do a better job.’

Me(kai) as a list-extender

- (xx) *hia pi tiok neng tsia tua siaNts'i*
PRT compare ASP 2SG.GEN this.kind.of big city
- me Gengtsiu a Otsiu a me T'iangtseng...*
what Guangzhou PRT Australia PRT what Tianjin
- Ua taN kaki pi kaki k'aksek si*
1SG say self compare self really COP
- u tua tsengpo kai*
have big progress SFP

'Well, (if Jieyang is to be) compared with your big cities, **like** Guangzhou, (or) Australian (cities), **like** Tianjin ... I say, it is better for one to compare with oneself and (jieyang) indeed has made a lot of progress.'

Mekai as a list-extender

(xx) *ua hengtsai tsio engbo tiaN mekai*
1SG now this.kind recording studio what.CL

la si huisioN siaNtseng. ts'iaN p'eng
also COP very advanced thousand
square.meter

kai engbo tiaN seN lai tsue tua
CL recording studio province inside most big

'My recording studio **and also other stuff**

(= facilities) are also very advanced.

This thousand square meter recording studio
is the biggest in the province.'

[The speaker is the director of Jieyang Radio station.]

Mekai as a list-extender

(xx) *tso iN mekai long kai seng kai*
sit chair what.CL all COP new SFP
'(The) chairs, **etc.**, are all new.'

Mekai ~ mehng as a list-extender

(xx) *i k'ait'au lai tsu kai nang*
3SG beginning come then to people
*taN ler mo tsia pa pa **meheN***
say 2SG cannot eat full full what.matter

'When he (the doctor) first arrived (to this place),
(he told) the people that they shouldn't eat too full,
etc.'

Mekai ~ mehng as a list-extender and mesur as indefinite pronoun

(xx) *i mo taN ler keme aiN k'er liangsip hoksip mehng?*
3SG say 2SG tonight want go practice review what.matter

oh I taN kimme kio ler k'er mesur mesur
PRT 3SG say tonight call 2SG go what.matter what.matter

tsu tiok a
then right SFP

'He said that you are going to (his place) to practice (and review) (playing the violin), **etc.**, right? ... oh, what he said was tonight he will ask you to go and do **this and that** (I think this is okay, as the speaker did not specify what sort of activities (we could engage in). Maybe I can change it to **something**. (I believe) that is the case.'

Mekai as a *whatchamacallit* placeholder

(xx) ㄟ這個入門這個，叫做物個，叫做陽臺或是物個臺，物鬼臺啊

e tsi kai zik mung tsi kai, kio tso mekai
PRT this CL enter door this CL call as what.CL

kio tso iangt'ai a si mekai tai,
call as verandah or COP what.CL platform

me kui t'ai a.
what devil platform PRT

Indefinite
modifier

With an
attitude

Can develop
into a
whatchamacallit
placeholder

'And **this thing**, when you enter the door, this, **whatchamacallit**
(**< what** is it called?) (**This thing**) called a verandah or **some kind**
of platform, devil knows what kind of platform.'

Mekai as a *whatchamacallit* placeholder

(xx)

e to tsi kai zip mung kio tso,
PRT at this CL enter door call as

zip meng tsi kai kio tso mekai a? kio tso
enter door this CL call as what.CL PRT call as

hue t'ai a si iangt'ai a si simme kui t'ai a
flower platform or COP veranda or COP what devil platform PRT

'At the entrance, there is this area which is called **what**? Which is called 'flower platform' or veranda or some kind of a platform.'

heN, kio tso me me mekai kengkuang mekai iangt'ai
yes, call as what what what.CL view what.CL veranda

a si mekai heN le
or COP what.CL such.as.this/that PRT

'Yes, (it) is called **er .. er .. some kind of** viewing platform or **some kind of verandah** or **something like that.**'

Bo mekai + ADJ as a negative attitude marker

(xx) *tsi kiaN t'oiN k'ilai bo me ho t'oiN*
this CL look upcome NEG.have what good look
'This garment **doesn't** look **so** beautiful.'

tsi kiaN saN u me ho t'oiN?
this CL garment have what good look
'**What is so good** looking about this garment?'

Conclusion

- Referential to non-referential uses
- Etymological variations
 - Cantonese *matje* ‘what thing’
 - Southern Min *mekai* ‘what + Classifier’
 - Mandarin *shenme* ‘what what’
 - Southern Min *sim mih, siam*
 - Cantonese *sam mo*