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) \textit{kimzek tsiak mekai?}
today eat what.CL
‘\textbf{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)  
\[ u \text{ mekai ho toiN?} \]

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

(i) 3SG then call PREF Second Auntie PRT

A Pref Second Auntie then take CL what.CL

‘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

(zk 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: 咁，啫許藥丸
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.]
(xx) A: 你愛物事？
le r 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?’

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?’
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

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

(i) imo taN ler keme aiN k’er liang sip hoksip meheng?
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

tsui 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

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

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

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*