Referring to arbitrary entities with placeholders

Tohru Seraku
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

A speaker/writer uses a placeholder (PH) to fill in the syntactic slot of a target word when she has no immediate access to the word or prefers to avoid explicitly mentioning it for contextual reasons. In the present article, I point out a hitherto understudied usage of PHs: a speaker/writer who does not have in mind a specific target form may use a PH to refer to an arbitrary entity (e.g. person, object, action, event, proposition). I substantiate this claim by analysing a variety of original data on Japanese *wh*-derived PHs. Further evidence for this claim comes from a cross-linguistic survey of *wh*-derived PHs in Korean and demonstrative-derived PHs in Romanian and Bulgarian. I show that the arbitrary-referential function is observed in PHs in all these languages, regardless of their origins (i.e. *wh* word, demonstrative) and their categories (i.e. nominal, verbal).

Keywords: target word, *wh* word, demonstrative, Japanese, Korean, Romanian, Bulgarian

1.   Introduction

There is a growing body of work on placeholders (PHs) in language studies (Hayashi and Yoon 2006; Amiridze et al. 2010; see Seraku 2020 for further references). A PH is used to fill in the syntactic slot of a target word when (i) a speaker has no immediate access to the target word or (ii) though the target word is accessible, she prefers to avoid verbalising it for contextual reasons. For illustration, consider English *what-d'you-call-it* in (1).

(1) **Mary:** *John, where's the **what-d'you-call-it?***

 John: *I put it back in the toolbox.*   (Enfield 2003, 103)[1]

Mary is using an electric drill and needs a chuck key, but she cannot immediately recall the expression *chuck key*. Therefore, she saturates its syntactic slot with the PH *what-d'you-call-it*. In this case, Mary uses the PH because the target word, *chuck key*, is inaccessible to her due to memory lapse. Another telling example of PHs comes from the novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling 1997). Consider Harry's utterance, said of Lord Voldemort: *What happened to Vo-… to **you-know-who?*** The target word *Voldemort* is accessible to Harry, but he resorts to the PH *you-know-who* to avoid verbalising it because the name is taboo.

It is sometimes claimed that PHs are expressions that stand for a word or phrase (Cheung 2015; Seraku 2020 among others). In the present article, I cast doubt on this claim, pointing out that a speaker/writer may use a PH when she does not have in mind a specific lexical form and in some such instances, intends to refer to an arbitrary entity (e.g. person, object, action, event, proposition). This claim is substantiated by a variety of original data from Japanese, Korean, Romanian, and Bulgarian.

There are various types of lexical or grammatical origins of PHs, including interrogative clauses (e.g. *what-d'you-call-it*), demonstratives, *wh* words, and semantically bleached items (Podlesskaya 2010, 12–13). Arguably, the most prevalent lexical source is demonstratives. In fact, there is a wealth of studies on demonstrative-derived PHs in Japanese (see Section 2); the present work complements these with new data on Japanese *wh*-derived PHs. *Wh*-derived PHs are also attested in Korean, but not in Romanian and Bulgarian. For the latter languages, demonstrative-derived PHs are analysed. I show that PHs may be used to refer to an arbitrary entity in all these languages, irrespective of their origins (i.e. demonstrative, *wh* word) and their categories (i.e. nominal, predicative).

Section 2 begins by defining PHs in more explicit terms to further pinpoint the issues to be addressed in this article. Section 3 then illustrates the arbitrary-referential function of PHs by providing a detailed analysis of *wh*-derived PHs in Japanese, and Section 4 presents further evidence from Korean, Romanian, and Bulgarian. Finally, Section 5 summarises the primary findings of this study and considers future prospects.

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1. In examples cited from previous studies or corpora, minor amendments were made for consistency purposes. For glossing, we adopt the Leipzig Glossing Rules, except for ADN 'adnominal,' DESID 'desiderative,' EMPH 'emphatic,' FEM 'feminine,' GER 'gerund,' HON 'honorific,' MAS 'masculine,' MM 'modal marker,' NEU 'neuter,' PH 'placeholder,' RECP 'reciprocal,' TAG 'tag question,' and TEMP 'temporal.' Japanese examples are notated in the Hepburn system (except that long vowels are transcribed as *aa* for /aː/, *uu* for /uː/, *ee* for /eː/, and *oo* for /oː/), and Korean examples in the Yale system.

2.   The issues: The referential types of placeholders

Though PHs are rather a marginal topic in linguistics, there is no shortage of previous studies (Rubino 1996; Matras 1998; Kitano 1999; Kim and Suh 2002; Enfield 2003; Jucker et al. 2003; Huang and Tanangkingsing 2005; Wouk 2005; Hayashi and Yoon 2006; Amiridze et al. 2010; Hengeveld and Keizer 2011; Cheung 2015; Palacios Martínez and Núñez Pertejo 2015; Lee et al. 2017; Tárnyiková 2019; Seraku 2020). Seraku's (2020, 2) definition of PHs is summarised in (2).

(2)   A speaker/writer may encounter a word-formulation problem when (i) the target word is inaccessible to her at the time of speech/writing or (ii) even if she is aware of it, she prefers not to reveal it for contextual reasons. In such cases, she may fill in the slot of the target word with a PH to overcome the word-formulation problem and possibly to achieve additional pragmatic effects.

Similar definitions are also found in other studies (e.g. Kitano 1999; Enfield 2003; Amiridze et al. 2010; Cheung 2015; Palacios Martínez and Núñez Pertejo 2015), with variations in labels and extension. Thus there are alternative terms for PHs, including *vague word* (Kaye 1990), *nonsense word* (Crystal 1995), and *dummy* (Hengeveld and Keizer 2011). And some scholars adopt a broader definition, subsuming PHs. Fox's (2010) use of *filler* includes PHs, interjective fillers (e.g. *uh*), and other expressions (e.g. *y'know*).

   Definition (2) contains two important ingredients. Firstly, a PH is a filling-in device in that it saturates the syntactic slot of the target word. In (1), *what-d'you-call-it* saturates a nominal slot, its nominal status being signalled by the article *the*. In this respect, PHs are distinguished from interjective fillers such as *uh* in *Can you pass me, **uh**, that mag?*, which occupies neither a nominal nor a predicative slot.

   Secondly, there are two types of motive for using a PH, numbered as (i) and (ii) in (2). As for motive (i), a typical situation is that a speaker/writer has no immediate access to the target word for cognitive reasons. She may not be able to retrieve the target word due to memory lapse (see (1)). Alternatively, if she is reading a passage aloud, characters may be illegible (Cheung 2015, 276). Use of a PH in these situations may engender further effects; it may help the speaker to hold her conversation turn (Kitano 1999, 389–390) or may invite the hearer to jointly search for the target word (Keevallik 2010, 157).

   As for motive (ii), the target word may be taboo in the community (see the earlier example of *you-know-who* in Section 1) or contextually inappropriate, as shown in (3).

(3)   [The speaker tells his wife that he bought ice creams, trying not to utter the word 'ice creams' because otherwise their child would say he wants to eat them.]

*issa   mise=kara pidzurusa-ru **muna** hoː-ti   ki-tɕa-ɴ-da*
a.while.ago store=ABL cold-ADN   PH   buy-CVB come-PST-IND-FP
'I bought cold thingies (= ice creams) at a store just now.'

(Seraku 2020, 5) [Yoron]

In other situations, a speaker may withhold the target word to mitigate its negative impact on the hearer or to enhance solidarity of conversation participants (Enfield 2003, 106–108).

Following Seraku (2020, 2) and others, I have so far assumed that PHs stand for a target word, but this does not necessarily seem to be the case. In some instances, a speaker seems to use a PH not as a substitute for a specific word, but as a placeholder for a concept. That is, a speaker may have only some vague idea that is difficult to verbalise, or she may find it troublesome to search for a word suited to express her intended concept, or she may just not think about what word she should use because a PH allows her to form her utterance without being specific.[2] Thus we could interpret Mary's utterance in (1) as indicating that she only entertains some concept (e.g. TOOL FOR USING A DRILL) without thinking about the word *chuck key* and utters *what-d'you-call-it* to save the effort to search for a specific word. In this article, I aim to make a case for the claim that the notion of "target word" is not pertinent to some usages of PHs. More specifically, I show that a PH may be used to hold a place for a concept (rather than a linguistic item) and that in some instances, it serves as a basis for referring to an arbitrary entity. This claim is substantiated by a detailed analysis of *wh*-derived PHs in Japanese (Section 3) and further corroborated by a cross-linguistic survey of *wh*-derived PHs in Korean and demonstrative-derived PHs in Romanian and Bulgarian (Section 4).

These topics have been understudied in the extant literature on the languages concerned. Firstly, little work has been carried out on Romanian and Bulgarian PHs; Podlesskaya (2010, 15) mentions the Bulgarian PHs *tova* and *takovam*, but without any examples. Secondly, *wh*-derived PHs in Japanese and Korean have hardly been analysed, despite extensive studies on demonstrative-derived PHs in these languages. In Japanese, the PH *are* is derived from the distal demonstrative *are* 'that' (e.g. Kitano 1999; Hayashi and Yoon 2006; Suga 2018; Seraku et al. 2021).[3] Consider Example (4). Prior to this excerpt, a participant has been talk-

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3. The demonstrative system of Japanese is tripartite, traditionally distinguished in terms of distance categories: (i) proximal (near speaker), (ii) medial (near hearer), and (iii) distal (away

ing about her elderly mother's strange behaviour (e.g. putting away clothes where they do not belong), and after a few exchanges, another participant utters (4).

(4) *Demo sore-wa moo o-toshi-no* **are** *chigau?*
but that-TOP EMPH HON-age-GEN PH TAG
'But that is an X of her age, isn't it?'   (Hayashi and Yoon 2006, 505) [Japanese]

The speaker seems to produce the PH *are* to avoid an expression that comes with a negative-flavoured meaning, such as *o-toshi-no mondai* 'an age-related problem.' In Korean, the PH *ceke* is derived from the distal demonstrative *ceke* 'that' (Suh 2000; Kim and Suh 2002; Yoon 2003; Hayashi and Yoon 2006).[4] Consider Example (5), where the speaker is talking to her guest at her home.

(5) *Ne* **ceke** *cwu-lkka? Chicukheyikh?*
2SG PH give-shall.I cheese.cake
'You, would you like to have whatsit? Cheese cake?'

(Hayashi and Yoon 2006, 492) [Korean]

The speaker likely cannot access *chicukheyikh* 'cheese cake' and fills in its syntactic slot with the PH *ceke.* Despite extensive work on PHs in Japanese and Korean, *wh*-derived PHs in these languages have been largely ignored. An exception is Lee et al. (2017), who provide only a few cases of the *what*-derived PHs *mwe* and *mwusun* in Korean. *Wh*-derived PHs are in fact found in many languages: Nahavaq (Austronesian; Dimock 2010), Udi/Agul (Caucasian; Ganenkov et al. 2010), Papuan Malay (Kluge 2015), and Mandarin (Cheung 2015). In Sections 3–4, I will describe a wide range of *wh*-derived PHs in Japanese and Korean, with nontrivial cross-language differences.

Previous studies use data from various sources: (i) spoken corpora or self-collected spoken materials (Hayashi 2003; Dimock 2010; Keevallik 2010), (ii) written corpora (including web data) or literary texts (Amiridze 2010; Hengeveld and Keizer 2011; Seraku et al. 2021), and (iii) elicited data (Enfield 2003; Cheung 2015; Seraku 2020). The present study uses spoken and written corpora for Japanese (see the References section for the list of the corpora consulted), but most data comes from the written corpora (BCCWJ, NWJC). This is because relevant examples are found mostly in the written corpora, probably due to the size of

from speaker and hearer; see Takubo 2020 for references). Of these three categories, only the distal demonstratives (e.g. pronominal *are* 'that,' locative *asoko* 'there') may serve as PHs.

4. As in Japanese, the demonstrative system of Korean is also tripartite, divided into three categories: (i) proximal (near speaker), (ii) medial (near hearer), and (iii) distal (away from speaker and hearer). Unlike Japanese, where only the distal forms act as PHs (see footnote 3), Korean allows both the distal form *ceke* and the medial form *kuke* to serve as PHs (Hayashi and Yoon 2006, 491).

the spoken corpus (CSJ): BCCWJ contains 104.3 million words, and CSJ only 7.52 million words. My written data are mostly from conversations in novels or addressee-oriented (e.g. a reply to a question on a Q&A site), but ideally these will need to be complemented by more spoken materials, an issue for future work. For Romanian and Bulgarian, I examine elicited examples. The analysis will eventually need to be supplemented by spontaneous data for these languages, too.

3.   *Wh*-derived placeholders in Japanese

3.1   Descriptive preliminaries

Japanese features a number of *wh* words, including *nani* 'what,' *dono* 'which,' *dare* 'who,' *itsu* 'when,' *doko* 'where,' and *naze* 'why.' An example of *nani* is given in (6).

(6) ***Nani**-o   kai-mashi-ta-ka?*
     what-ACC buy-HON-PST-Q
     'What did you buy?'   [Japanese]

As shown in (6), *wh*-interrogative sentences usually end with a question particle such as *ka*. A distinctive property of *wh* words is that whilst they may be case-marked, they are never topic-marked. Thus, Example (6), where *nani* is accusative-marked, is grammatical, whereas Example (7), where *nani* is topic-marked, is ungrammatical.

(7) *****Nani**-wa kai-mashi-ta-ka?*
     what-TOP buy-HON-PST-Q
     (Intended 'What did you buy?')   [Japanese]

Another notable property of *wh* words is that the interrogative force may be strengthened by emphatic *ittai*, as illustrated in (8).

(8) ***Ittai** nani-o   kai-mashi-ta-ka?*
     EMPH what-ACC buy-HON-PST-Q
     'What on earth did you buy?'   [Japanese]

Each *wh* word has a standard orthographic form. Thus, *nani* 'what' is usually written in kanji (何), and *doko* 'where' in hiragana (どこ).[5] Finally, there is a morpho-

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logical property specific to *nani*: *nani* has the allomorph *nan* before /t/, /d/, and /n/. This is illustrated in (9).

(9)   **Nan-no**   *hanashi-o kiki-tai-desu-ka?*
what-GEN story-ACC listen.to-DESID-HON-Q
'What story do you want to listen to?'   [Japanese]

Among Japanese *wh* words, only *nani* 'what' (and its variant forms discussed later) is used as a conventionally established PH form.[6] As will be pointed out in due course, this PH does not exhibit the properties of *wh* words mentioned above. For ease of reference, these properties are listed again in (10).

(10)   Properties of interrogative *wh* words in Japanese
a.   A *wh*-interrogative sentence ends with a question particle.
b.   *Wh* words cannot be marked with the topic particle *-wa*.
c.   The interrogative force may be strengthened by *ittai*.
d.   Each *wh* word has a standard orthographic form. (*Nani* is usually written in kanji.)
e.   *Nani* is realised as *nan* before /t/, /d/, and /n/.

3.2   Placeholder *nani*

As pointed out in Section 2, whilst the demonstrative-derived PH *are* is well described, little attention has been paid to *wh*-derived PHs. Example (11) shows that the *wh* word *nani* 'what' can be recruited as a nominal PH.

(11)   [In this blog post, the writer says that she listened to her favourite song by her favourite band and was very moved.]
Sakuya   kaji-o   oe-te   yonaka-ni   keitai   nigit-te
last.night housework-ACC finish-CVB midnight-TEMP mobile.phone hold-CVB
*reino   **nani** kik-aseteitadaki-mashi-ta.* [...] *Gookyuu-deshi-ta-yo.*
in.question PH   listen.to-HON-HON-PST   crying.a.lot-COP-PST-FP
'After finishing housework last night, I listened to you-know-what (= song), holding my mobile phone. I was so moved and cried a lot.'
(BCCWJ) [Japanese]

The use of *reino* 'the familiar (N)' in *reino nani* suggests that she presumes that, though she does not explicitly mention what she intends to refer to, readers (at

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6. Seraku et al. (2020) report that PHs that are derived from non-*nani wh* words such as *dare* 'who' and *itsu* 'when' are conventionally not established, though there are certain morpho-syntactic operations to stabilise their PH status. In the present article, I focus on the fully established PH form *nani*.

least, regular visitors to her blog) will be able to grasp the referent of *nani* without difficulty. This raises several interpretational possibilities. She might have thought about a specific word (e.g. the song's title) but chose not to disclose it, expecting that the reader would share some background information and cultural (i.e. musical) taste with her and easily understand what she refers to, perhaps in the hope that the confirmation of their shared taste would enhance their solidarity. Another possibility is that she did not remember the song's title but entertained some concept relating to the song (e.g. THE SONG THAT SHE LOVES AND LISTENED TO AT THE BAND'S CONCERT) and felt it cumbersome to verbalise it.

Nani in (11) lacks all the properties of interrogative *wh* words in (10). That is, (a) the sentence does not end with a question particle, (b) *nani* could be topic-marked as in *reino nani-wa* (when the familiar song is contrasted with another song), (c) use of the emphatic marker *ittai*, which must co-occur with an interrogative *wh* word, is not licensed, and (d) *nani* is written in katakana (ナニ) rather than in kanji (何). Property (10e) is not applicable in (11) because *nani* is not followed by a morpheme starting with /t/, /d/ or /n/ but in (12) it is followed by *-no* and still realised as *nani* rather than *nan*.

(12) [On a Q&A site, a woman has written about her boyfriend, who is often naked when he is at home. She asked how she could get him to put on clothes, and someone replies.]
Fuku-o   ki-nai-nara   kare-no ie-ni-wa   ika-nai-to
clothes-ACC wear-NEG-COND 3SG-GEN house-ALL-TOP go-NEG-COMP
danko   shuchoosu-bekidesu. [...] **Nani**-*no toki-igai-wa*   [...] *ifuku-o*
adamantly claim-should.HON   PH-GEN time-except-TOP   clothes-ACC
minimatot-temorau-shikaarimasen.
wear-BEN-have.to.HON
'You should insist that if he does not wear clothes, you will not visit his house. Except for whatsit (= intercourse), he has to wear clothes.'
(BCCWJ) [Japanese]

The writer appears to deploy the PH *nani* to avoid a sexual term such as *sekkusu* 'sex.' It is also possible that she did not think about such a specific word and had in mind only a vague concept relating to intercourse, using *nani* to save her the effort of searching for a suitable word.

In (13), it is not even possible to assume that *nani* is used to stand for a specific word.

(13)   [In this book, the writer states that one of the most important issues for the parents of students is who is assigned to their children as their class teacher.]
Kissaten-ni tamuroshi-ta   *okaasan guruupu-ga ookina*
cafe-LOC   gather.in.large.numbers-PST mother group-NOM loud
koe-de   hanashi-at-teir-assharu kookee-ni yoku dekuwashi-masu.
voice-INST talk-RECP-IPFV-HON   scene-ALL often come.across-HON
"*Kotoshi-wa   **nani**-sensee-nan-yo. Yokat-ta-waa.*" "*Maa yokat-ta-nee. Uchi-wa*
this.year-TOP PH-teacher-COP-FP good-PST-FP oh   good-PST-FP 1SG-TOP
***nani**-sensee. Gesshori.*"*-toitta chooshi-desu.*
PH-teacher depressing-like manner-COP
'I often see a group of mothers talking loudly at a cafe. They say things like "This year, the teacher of my child is Mr. So-and-so. It's a relief!" "Oh, that's good. The teacher of my child is Mr. So-and-so. It's depressing."'

(BCCWJ) [Japanese]

There are two instances of *nani*, and they do not stand for a specific word. Note that *-sensee* is the title for teachers and requires that its preceding slot be occupied by a proper name. The writer, who does not think of a specific name, resorts to the PH *nani* to fill in this slot. In this case, *nani*, together with *-sensee*, holds a place for a concept indicating an arbitrary teacher. This arbitrary reference is essential for explaining an issue important for the parents of students in general.

When a PH is used to refer to an arbitrary entity, it is not possible to replace the PH with some specific expression and refer to a certain entity denoted by the expression. For instance, it is not possible to replace *nani* in (13) with a specific proper name such as *Takahashi* and refer to an individual called *Takahashi*. This sharply contrasts with the cases where a PH is used to substitute for a target word; in these cases, one may replace a PH with a specific target form and refer to a certain entity denoted by the form.

Use of *nani* in (13) is akin to the usage of English capital letters for variables in general statements. Consider (14), which is meant to be part of a contract form.

(14)   *A and B agree on the terms and conditions stated below.*

Each of the capital letters *A* and *B* fills in the slot that is potentially occupied by a specific proper name, but such specific names are neither relevant nor intended here, at least until the contract form is actually presented to concrete individuals. The capital letters in (14) are used to refer to arbitrary, unspecified individuals, and this arbitrary reference enables the contract form to apply to anyone who is actually involved in the contract.

In a nutshell, the definition of PH in (2) is only partially correct; it is not exhaustive in two respects. First, a PH can be used not only when a speaker/writer substitutes for a target word, but also when she just entertains some concept and

has no particular lexical item in mind. Second, when a PH is used to hold a place for a concept, it may serve as a basis for referring to an arbitrary entity. In the ensuing subsections, I offer more examples of arbitrary reference based on the description of the PH *nani* and its variants.

3.3   Predicative variants of *nani*

The nominal PH form *nani* has a predicative variant *nanisuru* (where *suru* is a light verb meaning 'do'). As can be seen in (15), *nanisuru* acts as a verbal PH.

(15) [Someone has read a blog article about horsehair worms and posts her reply.]
      Kodomo-no koro kamakiri-o **nanisuru**-to hariganemushi-ga   deteki-ta
      child-GEN   time mantis-ACC PH-when   horsehair.worm-NOM come.out-PST
      koto-o   omoidashi-masu.
      thing-ACC remember-HON
      'I remember a time in my childhood when I X-ed (= cut up the body of) a
      mantis and saw horsehair worms come out of it.'   (NWJC) [Japanese]

The writer apparently relies on *nanisuru* to avoid producing a verb (or a verb phrase) that designates a violent action such as *saku* 'split (the body of a mantis)' or to hold a place for a concept such as TEAR UP, with a violent meaning in the present context.

As illustrated in (16), there is another predicative variant: *nanidesu*.[7]

(16) [On a Q&A site, someone has asked about the reliability of a Japanese guide-
      book since the guidebook is sometimes given a disparaging title (here repre-
      sented as *XX*). Someone else answers this question.]
      XX yoku ii-masu-ne... demo, **nanidesu**-yo, *kami beesu-no*
      XX often say-HON-FP   but   PH-FP   paper base-GEN
      joohoo-desu-kara   joohoo-ga   furuku nat-teshimau koto-wa
      information-COP-CSL information-NOM old   become-PFV thing-TOP
      shikatanonai-kotodesu.
      cannot.be.helped-MM.HON
      'People often call it *XX*. But it's you-know-what (= it cannot be helped). Infor-
      mation in the guidebook necessarily gets old because it is published in print
      form.'   (BCCWJ) [Japanese]

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7. *Nani* in *nanidesu* is followed by the copula *-desu*, a morpheme starting with /d/, but it is still realised as *nani*. This shows that *nani* in *nanidesu* is not an interrogative *wh* word (see (10e) in Section 3.1). I owe this point to Anthony Backhouse.

After producing *nanidesu* the writer subsequently elaborates, but there are several candidates for the referent of the PH. It may be the predicative sequence *shikatanonai-kotodesu* 'cannot be helped' or the clausal sequence *kami beesu-no* […] *shikatanonai-kotodesu*. Also, there is another indeterminacy concerning the motive for the use of *nanidesu*. The writer might have failed to retrieve the target form *shikatanonai-kotodesu* or have wanted to avoid formulating a lengthy clause.

Example (17) shows that *nanisuru* may also be used to refer to an arbitrary action.

(17) [In this post, the writer conveys that writing up a diary every day reduces his stress.]
Boku jitsuwa mainichi nikki kai-teru-ndesu.   *Kyoo-wa*   **nani**-*ga*
1SG   in.fact every.day diary write-IPFV-MM.HON today-TOP PH-NOM
at-ta-toka   **nanishi**-*ta-toka* **nani** *tabe-ta-toka.*
happen-PST-etc. PH-PST-etc.   PH   eat-PST-etc.
'In fact, I write in my diary every day, like "Such-and-such happened today," "I did such-and-such," "I ate such-and-such," and so on.'   (SNS post) [Japanese]

It is likely that in producing *nanishi-* (the infinitive form of *nanisuru*), the writer did not think about a specific action. He saturates the verbal slot with the PH to refer to an arbitrary action for the sake of explaining what kinds of topics he writes about in his diary. In (17), there are also two occurrences of the PH *nani* (see Section 3.2); the former refers to an arbitrary event, and the latter to an arbitrary meal.

The above analysis confirms that the PH *nani* and its verbal variant *nanisuru* may be used not only to substitute for a target word, but also to refer to an arbitrary entity. The types of arbitrary entities are diverse, including objects (the second instance of *nani* in (17)), actions (*nanisuru* in (17)), and events (the first instance of *nani* in (17)).

3.4   Archaic variants of *nani*

The corpus survey also uncovers archaic variants of the PH *nani*, such as *nani-gashi* in (18).[8] Perhaps due to its archaic flavour, there are only two unequivocal cases of *nanigashi* in CSJ, one of which is presented in (18).

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8. According to the Corpus of Historical Japanese, *nanigashi* is already attested in *Makura-no Sōshi* 'The Pillow Book,' written in the early 1000s by *Sei Shōnagon*.

(18) [The speaker delivers a presentation at an academic conference.]
　　　*Nijuugoman   nanasen   **nanigashi**-no tenki-tan'i-chuu*
　　　250.thousand seven.thousand PH-GEN   transcription-unit-in
　　　hatsuwa-tan'i-chuu-ni kono tagu-wa rokusen   yonhyaku   juuni-kai
　　　utterance-unit-in-at   this   tag-TOP six.thousand four.hundred twelve-times
　　　dete-orimashi-ta.
　　　come.out-HON-PST
　　　'Out of 257, XXX utterance units, this tag appeared 6,412 times.'
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(CSJ) [Japanese]

The speaker uses the PH *nanigashi* to substitute for part of the target word for
some reason; he may have supposed that the exact number was not important for
the current topic of his presentation, or he may have been reluctant to verbalise
the whole number, or he may have simply failed to recall it at the time of speech.

　　Archaic forms are also used for arbitrary-referential purposes. Let me illus-
trate this point with another form, *nanibee*, to add variety to our examples. Unlike
nanigashi, nanibee is specifically tailored for nominal reference to humans, prob-
ably because *-bee* in *nanibee* is a residue of archaic proper names such as *Hikobee*
and *Juubee*. Example (19) shows that *nanibee* may be employed to refer to an arbi-
trary person.

(19) [The writer writes about a TV programme featuring a village, stating that TV
　　　scenes that are impressive to the viewers may be banal to the villagers.]
　　　Mura-toiu   hitotsu-no chiiki shakai-de-no   warai-ya   kaidan-wa
　　　village-so.called one-GEN   area   society-LOC-GEN laughter-or ghost.story-TOP
　　　sono mura-no   hitotachi-nitotte ichiichi   setsumeisuru hitsuyoo-mo   nai
　　　that   village-GEN people-for   each.time explain   necessity-even absent
　　　*dokodoko-no **nanibee**-san-no hanashi-deat-tari naninani-mori-no kitsune-no*
　　　PH-GEN   PH-Mr-GEN   story-COP-or   PH-forest-GEN   fox-GEN
　　　hanashi-deat-tari-suru.
　　　story-COP-or-do
　　　'Funny stories or ghost stories in the society of a village may be just banal sto-
　　　ries for the villagers, such as the story of Mr. So-and-so at such-and-such place
　　　and the story of a fox in such-and-such forest.'   (BCCWJ) [Japanese][9]

In using *nanibee*, the writer is not referring to any concrete individual. This is evi-
dent from *warai-ya kaidan*, which in this context means funny or ghost stories (of
a village) in general. She says that if there is such a story, it will be banal to the
villagers. That is, she is just writing about unspecified individuals who may show

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9. In (19), the doubled forms *dokodoko* and *naninani* are glossed as PH. The latter will be dis-
cussed in Section 3.5. For the former, see Seraku et al. (2020).

up in a story. The PH *nanibee* is deployed here to hold a place for a concept indicating an arbitrary person for the sake of elaborating on "banal stories."

3.5 Doubled variants of *nani*

There is yet another type of variant, formed by doubling of *nani*. The PH *naninani* in (19), used adnominally as in **naninani** *mori* 'such-and-such forest,' refers to an arbitrary forest. The corpus data include other examples where *naninani* occurs adnominally such as **naninani** *hiroba* 'such-and-such square' and **naninani** *ike* 'such-and-such pond.' In each example, the PH refers to an arbitrary entity (e.g. an arbitrary square). There are also cases where *naninani* occupies a nominal position. This is illustrated in (20).

(20) *Oishii   koo **naninani**-ga aru-yo-tte   iu-to   hotondo anoo tabe-ni*
      delicious well PH-NOM   exist-FP-COMP say-COND usually   well eat-PURP
      iku-youna taipu-no   ningen-desu.
      go-like   type-GEN person-COP
      'I am the kind of person such that if I hear someone say "That restaurant
      serves delicious such-and-such," I usually go there to eat it.'   (CSJ) [Japanese]

In employing *naninani*, the speaker does not refer to any definite or specific entity; rather, she utters *naninani* to hold a place for a concept that indicates an arbitrary meal. This referential act is needed here to illustrate her personality.

A doubled PH form may combine with the copula *-dearu*, so that the whole cluster serves as a predicative PH. Consider (21).

(21) [In this book, the writer writes about his personal traits.]
      Boku, "**Naninanidearu**"-*to dangenshi-tari ronpyoosuru-no suki-janai-nda.*
      1SG   PH-QUOT   assert-or   comment-NMLZ like-NEG-MM
      'I don't like asserting or commenting in the manner of "It is such-and-such!".'
                                                             (BCCWJ) [Japanese]

In the examples of arbitrary reference considered thus far, a PH is used to refer to an arbitrary person, object, action, or event. What is unique about Example (21) is that *naninanidearu* is used to refer to an arbitrary proposition, as is evident from the fact that the PH functions as the object of *dangenshi-* 'assert.' Given that *-to* before *dangenshi-* is a quotation complementiser, *naninanidearu* can be seen as a clausal PH.

The doubled form *naninani* has previously been rarely examined, except for Sudo (2008) and Kudo (2020). They claim that *naninani* is licensed only in quotational environments. This is indeed true of (20)–(21), but it appears to be just a

tendency in the light of examples such as (22), where the clauses including *nani-nani* are not quoted.

(22)   [The writer writes about the university system in Japan.]
    Gakusee-wa ichinensee-kara **naninani-*gakubu* naninani-*gakka-ni***
    student-TOP first.grader-since PH-faculty   PH-department-ALL
    shozokusuru. Soosuruto sokode-no shudootekina gakumon-wa toozen
    belong   then   there-GEN leading   study-TOP   naturally
    naninani-*gakubu* naninani-*gakka-no* *gakumon-dearu wake-desu-ne.*
    PH-faculty   PH-department-GEN study-COP   reason-COP-FP
    'Students belong to such-and-such faculty or such-and-such department from
    their first year onwards. So their primary studies are naturally those of such-
    and-such faculty or such-and-such department.'   (BCCWJ) [Japanese]

In the corpora consulted, I did not find any unequivocal cases where *naninani* substitutes for a specific target word. Such cases may perhaps occur in a larger corpus, but even if *naninani* never realises the target-substituting function, we can still regard *naninani* as a PH because, as we have argued, a PH may be exploited not only to substitute for a target word but also to hold a place for a concept.

3.6   Summary

It has been argued that (i) Japanese has several types of *wh*-derived PHs and (ii) these PHs are used not only to substitute for a target word but also to refer to an arbitrary entity. The types of arbitrary referents are quite diverse, ranging from persons, objects, actions, and events to propositions.[10] The upshot of this discussion is that the definition of PH in (2) is only partially correct. PHs (at least, Japanese *wh*-derived PHs) are used not only to substitute for a target word but also to hold a place for a concept. In the latter case, the intended concept may be a specific one or may indicate an arbitrary entity. As will be shown in the next section, the connection between PH forms and the function of arbitrary reference is not accidental but amply attested in several other languages besides Japanese.

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10.   This diverse range of referents looks miscellaneous, but all of them can be reduced to the notion of "entity" in the sense of Lyons (1977, 442–445). His notion of entity includes "first-order" entities (e.g. person, object), "second-order" entities (e.g. action, event), and "third-order" entities (e.g. proposition).

4.   Evidence from Korean, Romanian, and Bulgarian

The present section offers cross-linguistic evidence for my contention that PHs may be used for arbitrary-referential purposes. To this end, I chose Korean, Romanian (Romance), and Bulgarian (Slavic). Firstly, Korean features *wh*-derived PHs, but their properties are different from those of Japanese *wh*-derived PHs in some respects. Secondly, Romanian and Bulgarian feature demonstrative-derived PHs. As we will see, the arbitrary-referential function is found in all these languages, regardless of the origins of PH (i.e. *wh* word, demonstrative) and the categories of PH (i.e. nominal, verbal).[11]

4.1   Korean

As in Japanese, Korean has a number of *wh* words such as *nwukwu* 'who,' *mwe* 'what,' *encey* 'when,' *eti* 'where,' and *way* 'why.' Some of these *wh* words are illustrated in (23)–(24).

(23)   ***Nwukwu**-lul manna-ss-supni-kka?*
       who-ACC   meet-PST-HON-Q
       'Whom did you meet?'   [Korean]

(24)   ***Encey** Cwun-ul manna-ss-supni-kka?*
       when Jun-ACC meet-PST-HON-Q
       'When did you meet Jun?'   [Korean]

Wh-interrogative sentences end in a question particle such as *-kka* and are usually produced with a rising intonation. In some verb paradigms, a question particle is not used; in such cases, *wh*-interrogative sentences are still produced with a rising intonation. Further, though Korean *wh* words may be topic-marked in rhetorical questions (Jung 2017, 134), they generally resist topic-marking. Thus, Examples (23)–(24) become ungrammatical if the *wh* words are marked with the topic particle *-nun*, as in **nwukwu-nun* and **encey-nun*.

   Unlike in Japanese, where only *nani* 'what' is utilised as a conventionally established PH form, the Korean *wh* words mentioned above are more freely used as PHs, except for *way* 'why.' Consider (25).

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(25) *Mianhay i   nelpun   kasum-ey mwuthye   talun   **nwukwu**-lul*
　　sorry   this broad.ADN chest-LOC be.buried.GER another PH-ACC
　　sayngkakhaysses-se. Mianhay ne-uy   son-ul   cap-ko   kelul
　　think.of.PST-CVB   sorry   2SG-GEN hand-ACC hold-CVB walk.ADN
　　ttay-ey-to   tteollyesses-se,   ku salam-ul.
　　when-TEMP-even remember.PST-CVB that person-ACC
　　'Sorry, I was thinking of another X (= woman) when I held you tightly. Sorry, I
　　was thinking of her even when we walked holding hands together.'
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(song lyric) [Korean]

In (25), the man apologises to his girlfriend because he keeps thinking of another
woman. The PH *nwukwu* (< 'who') is used to avoid explicitly mentioning the
name of the woman. Note that the first sentence in (25), in which *nwukwu* occurs,
does not end with a question particle and that it is produced with a falling intona-
tion.

　　Since a *wh*-derived PH is no longer an interrogative *wh* word, it may be topic-
marked even if it does not occur in a rhetorical question. This is shown in (26), an
excerpt from a book on psychology.

(26) *Kathun hakkup-uy   haksayng-ilcilato **nwukwu**-nun yelsimhi*
　　same   homeroom-GEN student-despite   PH-TOP   hard
　　*kongpwu-ha-ko **nwukwu**-nun kongpwu-lul yelsimhi an-han-ta.*
　　study-do-CVB   PH-TOP   study-ACC   hard   NEG-do-DECL
　　'Student X studies hard and student Y does not, even though they are in the
　　same class.'　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Sejong Corpus) [Korean]

Example (26) illustrates the arbitrary-referential function of the PH *nwukwu*. The
point of the excerpt concerns the variability of students' motivations for learning
in general, and the names of specific students are not relevant. The writer uses the
PH *nwukwu* to hold a place for a concept indicating an arbitrary student. This
arbitrary-referential act is needed to explain students' learning motivation in gen-
eral terms.

　　Since topic-marking is a reliable morpho-syntactic criterion to distinguish
PHs from *wh* words, I collected examples of topic-marked *wh* forms: *encey-nun*
'when-TOP,' *eti-nun* 'where-TOP,' and *mwues-un* 'what-TOP.' Given this morpho-
syntactic criterion, it is fair to say that all these forms serve as PHs (at least, when
not occurring in rhetorical questions). Consider (27), an excerpt from a novel.

(27) *Kulen cali-lul* **encey**-*nun tuleka-lye-ko*   *ay-lul*   *ssu-ko*   *maksang*
such   post-ACC PH-TOP   enter-will-COMP concern-ACC use-CVB actually
tuleka-sen   *hwulccek nawa-peli-ko*,   *totaychey g-uy*
enter-CVB.TOP suddenly come.out-PFV-CVB EMPH   G-GEN
simsa-nun   *al-takato*   *molul*   *il-i-ess-ta.*
internal.feeling-TOP know-COND not.know.ADN thing-COP-PST-DECL
'G tried hard to obtain such a post at such-and-such time, but after he actually
got it, he suddenly resigned. He was really inscrutable.'

(Sejong Corpus) [Korean]

The writer does not specify the time at which G tried to obtain the post, and there
is no reason to assume that such specification is essential in the present discourse
context. The PH *encey* is utilised here to refer to an arbitrary time for the sake of
conveying narratively more important information (i.e. 'G is an inscrutable per-
son.').

As in the case of Japanese (see Section 3.5), doubling is possible for some
Korean *wh* words such as *encey* 'when,' *nwukwu* 'who,' *mwe* 'what,' and *eti* 'where.'
Consider (28), an excerpt from a newspaper column.

(28) **Mwemwe** *topki-uy*   *catong-umtap-sepisu*   *cenhwa-mokum-un*
PH   support-GEN automatic-response-service telephone-donation-TOP
kukes-i   *ciniko-iss-nun* […] *sahoycek kungcengseng-i iss-ciman* […]
that-NOM have-IPFV-ADN   social   rationality-NOM exist-but
'As for the automatic response service of telephone-mediated donations for
support of X (= financially challenged people), it has social rationality, but …'

(Sejong Corpus) [Korean]

The writer may have used *mwemwe* (< 'what') to substitute for the target word, a
socially sensitive term such as *pinkonchung* 'those who financially suffer.' Alterna-
tively, the writer might just have entertained some concept such as FINANCIALLY
CHALLENGED PEOPLE and produced the PH to save the effort of searching for a
word that could express this concept.

To sum up, despite some cross-language differences, *wh*-derived PHs are
found in both Japanese and Korean, and at least some of these forms (as in
(26)–(27)) may be used to refer to arbitrary entities.

4.2   Romanian

In Romanian, PHs are not formed with *wh* words, but there is a set of PHs deriv-
ing from the distal demonstratives 'that, those.' Romanian demonstratives are clas-
sified in terms of gender (masculine, feminine), number (singular, plural), and
distance (proximal, distal). Table 1 shows the distal forms.

Table 1. Distal demonstratives in Romanian

	singular (SG)	plural (PL)
masculine (MAS)	*ăla*	*ăia*
feminine (FEM)	*aia*	*alea*

Romanian PHs are illustrated in the examples below. In (29), Maria cannot remember the target word *detergent* at the time of speech and resorts to the PH *ăla*.

(29) [Maria wants to use a washing machine and needs some detergent. She asks David about its whereabouts, but cannot remember the word for 'detergent.']

Maria: *David, unde e   **ăla?***
   D where COP PH
   'David, where is the what-d'you-call-it (= detergent)?'

David: *L-am pus înapoi în dulap   sub   chiuvetă.*
   1SG   put back in cupboard under sink
   'I put it back in the cupboard under the sink.'   [Romanian]

In (30), David is aware of the expression *papanași*, but he utters the PH *ăia* to mask the target word so that he can please his guests with unexpected desserts.

(30) [David organised a dinner party for Romanian professors at a university in Japan. In Romania, many people like papanași, traditional desserts of dough-nuts covered with soft cheese. Papanași are not generally sold in Japan, and David secretly bought them at a Romanian restaurant in Tokyo. After people finish eating the main dishes, he is about to serve papanași.]
*Ei bine, este timpul să servim **ăia**.*
well   COP time   to serve PH
'Well, it is time to serve thingies (= papanași).'   [Romanian]

With an example like (29) above, where the speaker has no immediate access to the target word, all four forms in Table 1 are available. In (30), where the speaker is aware of the target word, there is cross-speaker variation. Some speakers choose a PH form whose number and gender match those of the target word; in (30), *ăia* matches *papanași*, a masculine-plural noun. Other speakers use any form in Table 1.

Crucially, Example (31) shows that *ăla* may also be used to refer to an arbitrary entity.

(31)   [David teaches at a university. He talks with his colleague about what their stu-
dents often say about classes.]
Nivelul clasei este diferit   în funcție   de profesor,   nu? Aud mereu studenți
level   class COP different in function of professor no   hear always student.PL
spunând "Cursul predat de profesorul ăla este ușor, dar cursul predat de
saying   course taught of professor PH COP easy but course taught of
profesorul ăla este dificil."
professor PH COP difficult
'The class level is different depending on teachers, isn't it? I always hear stu-
dents saying "The class taught by Professor So-and-so is easy, but the class
taught by Professor So-and-so is difficult".'   [Romanian]

Since David's utterance is a general statement, specific names of professors are
irrelevant. So, he uses *ăla* (SG, MAS), combined with *profesorul* (SG, MAS), to refer
to an arbitrary professor. In addition to the SG-MAS combination, the other possi-
ble combinations are also allowed in (31): *profesoara aia* (SG, FEM), *profesorii ăia*
(PL, MAS), and *profesoarele alea* (PL, FEM).

4.3   Bulgarian

Bulgarian is similar to Romanian in that demonstratives (but not *wh* words) are
recruited as PHs, but there are some cross-language differences. First, in Bul-
garian, it is proximal (rather than distal) forms that usually behave as PHs. Bul-
garian demonstratives are classified in terms of gender (masculine, feminine,
neuter), number (singular, plural), and distance (proximal, distal). Table 2 spells
out the proximal forms. Second, a demonstrative-derived PH often combines with
a semantically general noun such as *nešto* 'thing,' as in *tova nešto*.

Table 2. Proximal demonstratives in Bulgarian

	singular (SG)	plural (PL)
masculine (MAS)	*tozi*	*tezi*
feminine (FEM)	*tazi*	
neuter (NEU)	*tova*	

Bulgarian PHs are exemplified in (32)–(33). In (32), Maria, who cannot access
the target word, relies on the PH *tova nešto* to substitute for the target word
'detergent.'

(32) [Maria wants to use a washing machine and needs some detergent. She asks
      Denis about its whereabouts, but cannot remember the word for 'detergent.']
      Maria: *Denis, kăde e   **tova nešto?***
              D   where COP PH   thing
              'Denis, where is the what-d'you-call-it (= detergent)?'
      Denis: *Složih   go obratno v škafa   pod   mivkata.*
              put.1SG it back   in cabinet under sink
              'I put it back in the cupboard under the sink.'   [Bulgarian]

In (33), Denis is motivated to use the PH *tova nešto* for interpersonal reasons,
withholding the target word *baklava* in the hope that the guests will be pleasantly
surprised.

(33) [Denis organised a dinner party for Bulgarian professors at a university in
      Japan. Bulgarian people like baklava, sweet pastries, but they are not generally
      sold in Japan. So he secretly bought some at a Bulgarian restaurant in Tokyo.
      After people finish eating the main dishes, he is about to serve baklava.]
      *E,   vreme e   da servirame **tova nešto.***
      well time COP to serve.1PL PH   thing
      'Well, it is time to serve thingies (= baklava).'   [Bulgarian]

Next, consider Example (34), which features an arbitrary-referential use. The PH
tozi combines with the masculine noun *profesor* 'professor' and refers to an arbi-
trary professor.[12]

(34) [Denis teaches at a university. He talks with his colleague about what their stu-
      dents often say about classes.]
      Trudnostta na predmeta   zavisi   ot   prepodavatelja, nali? Često
      difficulty   of subject.DEF depend.3SG from teacher   right often
      *studentite kazvat: "Na **tozi** profesor   predmetăt e   lesen, no na **tozi***
      student.PL say.3PL of PH professor subject.DEF COP easy but of PH
      profesor   predmetăt e   truden."
      professor subject.DEF COP difficult
      'The class level is different depending on teachers, isn't it? I often hear stu-
      dents saying "The class taught by Professor So-and-so is easy, but the class
      taught by Professor So-and-so is difficult".'   [Bulgarian]

In addition to the demonstrative-derived PHs, Bulgarian has the predicative PH
takovam, which combines *takova* 'this kind of' and the verbaliser *-m*. (Note that

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12. There is a feminine form *profesor-ka*, but it tends to be avoided in contemporary Bulgarian.
One usually chooses the masculine form *profesor* even to refer to a female professor.

takovam is the citation form (1SG, PRS).) This PH is typically used to avoid a sexual term, as illustrated in (35).

(35)   [Denis is talking with his friend. Denis saw the friend walking with his girl-
       friend in a city yesterday and asks him what he did with his girlfriend yester-
       day.]
       *Ami, nie se   **takovahme** snošti.*
       well 1PL RECP PH   last.night
       'Well, we did you-know-what (= had intercourse) last night.'   [Bulgarian]

According to my informant, though *takovam* is typically used to avoid a sexual term, it may also be used when a speaker cannot immediately retrieve the target word, as shown in (36).

(36)   [Denis receives a phone call from his friend when he is in the middle of turn-
       ing a screw to fix a clock. The friend asks what he is doing, and he replies.]
       *Sega **takovam**, za da popravja časovnika.*
       now PH   for to fix   clock
       'I am now X-ing (= turning a screw) to fix a clock.'   [Bulgarian]

Crucially, *takovam* can also be used for arbitrary-referential purposes. This is illustrated in (37).

(37)   [Denis teaches at a university in Japan, and he talks with his colleague about
       how busy professors are these days.]
       *V Japonija prepodavatelite sa   mnogo zaeti,   zaštoto **takovat** v kampusa,*
       in Japan   teacher.PL   COP much busy.PL because PH   in campus
       ***takovat** na konferencii,   **takovat** vkăšti i   taka natatăk*
       PH   at conference.PL PH   at.home and so   onwards
       'In Japan, professors are very busy because they do such-and-such on campus,
       do such-and-such at conferences, do such-and-such at home, and so on.'
                                                                    [Bulgarian]

Denis, by using the PH *takovam*, refers to arbitrary actions to explain why professors in Japan are busy. Whilst each action is meant to be arbitrary, the type of action is partially specified due to the locative adjuncts. For example, the first instance of *takovam*, which co-occurs with *v kampusa* 'on campus,' refers to an arbitrary action that professors usually do on campus.

In sum, Bulgarian has not only demonstrative-derived nominal PHs (as in Romanian) but also the verbal PH *takovam*, and these forms may be used to achieve arbitrary reference.

4.4   Summary

The objective of this section has been to lend cross-linguistic support to my contention that a speaker/writer may employ a PH to refer to an arbitrary entity. To this end, I have explored various examples in Korean, Romanian, and Bulgarian, whilst at the same time pointing out their cross-language discrepancies.

A caveat is in order here. I do not claim that all PHs can be used to refer to an arbitrary entity. Consider *you-know-who* and *what-d'you-call-it*. One cannot say *you-know-who* to refer to an arbitrary professor in the context of (31)/(34); for this purpose, one may use *so-and-so*, as in *Professor So-and-so*. Also, one cannot say *do what-d'you-call-it* to refer to an arbitrary action in the context of (37); an appropriate form here is *do such-and-such*. These restrictions seem to arise due to the encoded meaning of the clauses these expressions derive from. For instance, *you-know-who* derives from the clause *you know who*, and this literally signifies that the hearer knows who the speaker is talking about. This "known referent" presupposition rules out the arbitrary-referential possibility.[13]

5.   Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated the referential nature of PHs by analysing new data from four languages: Japanese, Korean, Romanian, and Bulgarian. PHs in these languages may be used to substitute for a target word or to refer to an arbitrary entity (e.g. person, object, action, event, proposition).

In closing, let me point out empirical and theoretical implications of the present enquiry. To begin with some empirical points, many previous studies on PHs have centred around English and Japanese (and to a lesser extent, Korean, Mandarin, and some other languages). The present study aims to fill that gap by analysing *wh*-derived PHs in Japanese and Korean, as well as Romanian and Bulgarian PHs. More importantly, the relationship between a PH form and the function of arbitrary reference has not been addressed in detail elsewhere. More work is needed to further establish this form–function relationship across a wide array of languages and to uncover cross-linguistic parallelisms and differences in this regard.

Theoretically, an essential task is to specify the encoded meaning of PHs and to explicate the ways in which it interacts with contextual information and pragmatic principles. Whilst some theoretically informed studies exist (Enfield 2003; Jucker et al. 2003; Hengeveld and Keizer 2011; Cheung 2015; Seraku 2020), none

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13.   I owe this point to an insightful comment from one of the reviewers.

of them specifies the encoded meaning of PHs in explicit terms, let alone its interaction with contextual information and pragmatic principles. Here two theoretical implications may be drawn from the present study. First, the arbitrary-referential function is associated with the use of PHs in several different languages, regardless of their origins (i.e. *wh* word, demonstrative) and their categories (i.e. nominal, verbal). This, I argue, motivates a unitary account whereby the single encoded meaning of a PH results in the target-substituting function in some contexts and the arbitrary-referential function in others. Second, the claim that PHs may be exploited to hold a place for a concept (rather than a word or phrase) suggests that any legitimate treatment of PHs must allow that they may be metalinguistic (i.e. stand for a word or phrase) in some instances, but not always. This point challenges an essentially metalinguistic account of PHs (see Cheung 2015).

I hope that the findings reported in this article will stimulate cross-linguistic descriptions of PHs (especially, the relationship between PH forms and their functions) and place fruitful constraints on the legitimate range of theoretical accounts.

Acknowledgements

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Publication history