Mandarin SHENME as a superweak NPI

In the past thirty years, Frans Zwarts has written several papers providing crucial insight in licensing contexts for Negative Polarity Items (NPIs), presenting a more nuanced picture than Ladusaw’s (1979) downward entailing (DE) requirement. Zwarts demonstrated (1981) that a number of Dutch NPIs appear only in a subset of DE-contexts, and proposed (1995) non-veridicality as a logico-semantic property that licenses so-called superweak NPIs. Such superweak NPIs, however, have hardly been attested. We show that Mandarin shenme (‘a (thing)’) is a prototypical superweak NPI. We explain its ungrammaticality in veridical contexts by arguing that shenme exhibits a lexical referential deficiency. Acquisition data, furthermore, suggest that children initially analyze shenme as a WH-quantifier but acquire the referential deficiency underlying its NPI status after the age of four.

Overall, shenme is a superweak NPI according to Zwarts’ typology (1998) (J Lin et al. 2014). Greek NPIs such as kanenas and Korean rato-NPIs fall under this class as well.

They are often used with 在, 从, 到, 走, 去, 来, 回 to form questions like什么时候到 & 到什么时候. Read the difference. 什么时候 Shénme shíhou is more widely used and understood by everyone. 几时 Jǐshí is deemed to be a more formal traditional word adopted in the Chinese literature. Furthermore, the southern part of China uses 几时 Jǐshí more than the northern part of China. The Cantonese people use this word to express When in Chinese too. The Northern Chinese may not understand the meaning if you use 几时 Jǐshí. Therefore, it is better to stick to the standard phrase 什么时候 Shénme shíhou for asking When in Mandarin questions so everyone would understand.