This paper focuses on the similarity and, more importantly, differences between ye (also) and dou (all) in Chinese sentences which exhibit a distributive reading. It consists of two parts. First, it shows that while dou induces a distributive reading on the subject, ye doesn’t. The subject in (1) may or may not have a distributive reading, depending on whether ye or dou occurs with it. For a sentence containing ye to be felicitous, there must be another person (or persons) (A) whose identity is understood through context and the predicate is true of A. In lian…dou construction, where there is always an understood set to highlight the overt focused element, both ye and dou are possible.

(1) Tamen dou/ye mai-le yi ben-shu
   they all/also buy-asp one cl book
   “They each/also bought a book.”

(2) Lian Zhangsan dou/ye mai-le yi ben-shu
   even Zhangsan all/also buy-asp one cl book
   “Even Zhangsan bought a book.”

Second, dou and ye behave differently if the subject itself has a universal reading. In particular, when the subject is mei ge-ren or jia-jia as in (3) and (4), while dou is always needed, ye is consistently rejected.

(3) Mei ge-ren dou/*ye mai-le yi ben-shu
   every cl person all/also buy-asp one cl book
   “Everyone (*also) bought a book.”

(4) Jia-jia dou/*ye mai-le yi ben-shu
   family-family all/also buy-asp one cl book
   “Every family (*also) bought a book.”

When the subject is a wh-phrase as in (5), dou is good, but ye is good only in negative sentences.

(5) a. shei dou/*ye mai-le yi ben-shu
    who all/also buy-asp one cl book
    “Everyone (*also) bought a book.”

A similar situation occurs when an indefinite noun phrase like yi ge-ren as in (6) co-occurs with dou or ye. The sentence implies that no one bought a car. For both dou and ye, the sentence must be in the negative form.

(6) a. yi ge-ren dou/ye mei mai yi shu
    one cl person all/also not buy book
    “Not even one person bought a book.”

   b. *yi ge-ren dou/ye mai-le yi shu
      one cl person all/also buy-asp book

It is assumed that there is a covert wulun (no matter) before the wh-phrase shei in (5) (cf. Cheng & Huang 1996) and lian (even) in front of yi ge-ren in (6) as both of them can be left out freely.

Given the assumption that ye needs a parallel reference set to highlight the overt subject, it is suggested that wulun and lian optionally introduce a contrastive set (Y) parallel with the overt wh-phrase/ indefinite noun phrase (X), respectively. The logical relation between the two is that Y contains X as a subset. For ye to be felicitous, sentences containing X and Y must be either true or false at the same time. We can only manipulate sentences with X because Y is what we assume to function in the context. If a sentence containing X is true, that does not guarantee those containing Y are also true. But if X is false, Y must be false, since X is a subset of Y.

With this formulation, plus dou may induce a distributive reading on the subject (if the subject is potentially distributable), whereas ye’s lexical meaning requires a parallel set determined from context to exhibit a distributive reading with the overt subject, we may expect the pattern shown in (1-6).

Selected references: