

The Question of Không: use and effects of the Vietnamese negative and interrogative über-particle.

Tom McClive

State University of New York at Buffalo

An investigation of the particle "không" in Vietnamese shows how its seemingly-unrestrictive insertion into sentences follows syntactic patterns of scope, creates semantic shifts, and abides by social and situational conventions. "Không" is essentially a negative marker, able to modify several different grammatical categories and also stand alone. But it also functions as an interrogative marker, and is able to focus on many distinct parts of a sentence. While its placement seems to be quite liberal, the varying resultant scope and the semantic effects from its use requires that the sentence construction be carefully monitored.

This study focuses mainly on interrogative productions, both those using “không” alone and also those using “không” together with the emphatic lexeme có, perhaps the most common type of interrogative construction. Like other Vietnamese wh-like interrogative words, a “có...không” construction can directly insert itself into a sentence at most points of the designated point of questioning, but unlike them, it can modify specific parts of the question, expanding and contracting its scope by piggybacking on the scope of other elements within the sentence, evoking its own domain from their scope. Also unlike normal wh-words, a “không” construction can change the tense, aspect, and meaning of a sentence, and expand the semantic domains of other particles.

“Không” as a negative marker can be placed immediately before several elements of a sentence, such as the main verb. For example, its position defines its scope over the entire verb phrase or perhaps just on a aspect marker while leaving the verb without a grammatical negative status. It can also modify a noun (for example, “không ai” = no one) and other phrases

such as a possessive marker (“của” = belongs to, “không của” = doesn't belong), or a stative (“không sao” = it doesn't matter).

The simple presence of “không” in a sentence-final position is enough to make a declarative sentence into an interrogative, similar to a few other words in Vietnamese (such as “chưa”, meaning “yet”), by adding a questioning role to the sentence, similar to a sentence-final tag question. But together with other elements, such as the lexeme “có” or other wh-type interrogative words, “không” can modify its scope much more than a simple syntactic placement in a sentence would seem to warrant. The positioning alone in a sentence seems to evoke a syntactic *carte blanche* not given to other particles; the resultant variety of scope mirrors the effects “không” has with its negating properties. Furthermore, “không” working with other wh-type words changes the scope of the particular wh-word to be general and nonspecific, for instance, changing “dâu”, meaning “where” into a meaning of “anywhere”.

While a typological matrix-like comparison may give us a list of common forms and variations, a more syntactic and pragmatics-based analysis can show us the both the uses and the usefulness of “không” constructions.

1. “Không”, the animal

“Không” is a negative marker in Vietnamese. Standing alone, it can mean “no”, as a response to an event, or “zero”, the number. Within a sentence, its most common position is directly before the verb.

Tôi ăn	Tôi không ăn
[I eat]	[I neg. eat] = I'm not eating

The semantic scope of “không” within a sentence is not limited to verbs or verb phrases. “Không” also works with many other words, serving to negate their concepts whether it's a single-word construction or an entire noun phrase:

không ai = no one

không sao = It doesn't matter.

Cái này của tôi
[this thing belong me]

This belongs to me.

Cái này không phải của tôi
[this thing neg. true belong me]

This doesn't belong to me.

2. Forming an interrogative:

One of the most common uses of “không” is in forming an interrogative sentence. The construction employs the negative meaning of “không” to suggest that the sentence may have the opposite semantic meaning. “phải không” (“truth negative”) is a common tag question attached to a declaration-type sentence, questioning its validity.

Anh kat
[you be-thirsty]
You are thirsty

Anh kat, phải không?
[You thirsty truth neg.]
You are thirsty, no?

Usually, the addition of “không” alone at the end of a sentence is enough to turn it into an interrogative.

Anh nhớ
[you remember]
You remember.

Anh nhớ không?
[you remember neg.]
You remember, no?
(Don't you remember?)

The standard non-tag question formation of an interrogative sentence is to use the “có” particle together with “không”. The “có” particle usually comes immediately before the verb, while “không” comes at the end of the sentence. Its scope then can almost be described as being linear, surrounding its VP domain.

Anh hiểu
[you understand]

Anh có hiểu không?
[you part. understand neg.]

You understand

Do you understand?

This "có...không" construction surrounds any other elements included within the verb phrase.

Anh hiểu tiếng Việt
[you understand language vietnamese]
You understand Vietnamese

Anh có hiểu tiếng Việt không?
[you part. understand language vietnamese neg.]
Do you understand Vietnamese?

The formula works on almost all constructions.

Chị buồn	Chị <u>có</u> buồn <u>không</u> ?
[you be-sad]	[You part. be-sad neg.]
You are sad.	Are you sad?

3. The scope and effects of "không":

When forming a negative, "không" often has license to insert itself just before the element to be negated, keeping with a linear fashion. From a "Tôi đi được" sentence ("I can go"), "không" can be inserted before either of the two serial verbs. The two different placements affects the meaning of the resultant sentences.

Tôi đi được	Tôi đi <u>không</u> được	◀ {it's not logically
[I go able-to]	[I go neg. able-to]	possible to go.
I can go	I can't go	Not become a
		reality}

Tôi <u>không</u> đi được	◀ {I have other things to
[I neg. go able-to]	do, another engagement,
I can't go	too much work, etc.}