Negation in Vietnamese and in some of the Việt-Mường languages

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In modern Vietnamese, the negative morpheme is *không*. In the 17th century however, the negative particle was *chẳng* as attested in A. de Rhodes' *Brevis Declaratio* included in his *Dictionarium annamiticum lusitanum, et latinum.*

Không is borrowed from Chinese : transcribed by the character 空 , it is categorized in this language as an adjective meaning 'empty, void'. Due to an internal evolution, *không* has become a regular negative particle in Vietnamese, and replaces *chẳng* of Vietnamese origin. The grammaticalization of *không* which extended over many centuries did not fail to rouse the curiosity of linguists, more especially as this phenomenon was taking place outside of any Chinese domination.

Why this replacement of *chẳng* by *không* ? Did *không* bring something more with regard to negation ? To answer this question, we will relate the opposition of *chẳng/không* to that of two types of negation, negation of truth and negation of existence.

1. The *chẳng/không* contrast

Nowadays, *không* has completely replaced *chẳng* as a negative preverb. Hà Q.N. et Pham N.T. (1976) counted 732 uses of *không* for 129 uses of *chẳng* in a survey of the press vocabulary. Many syntax-semantic differences between *chẳng* and *không* explain the replacement of the first by the second.

1.1. Yes-no questions using sentences with nominal predicate

Chẳng or rather its allomorph *chăng,* contrary to *không*, can serve as a negative particle in a yes-no question whose affirmative term is a sentence with nominal predicate. Below is a delarative sentence, ex. (1), and its interrogative counterpart, ex. (2):

(1) *Nó   là   sinh viên*
    he   be   student
    He is a student

(2) *Nó   là   sinh viên   (hay)   chăng ?*
    he   be   student   or   Neg.
    Is he a student ?

If we replace *chăng* by *không*, then the resulting sentence (3) will be ill-formed :

(3)   *Nó là sinh viên (hay) không ?*

The contrast acceptable/unacceptable between (2) and (3) can be explained by the fact that *không* serves to negate an existence while *chẳng/chăng* is used to deny a truth. This will be clear in (4) where if we do not replace *không* by *chăng*, we have to add before the copula *là* 'to be' the morphemes *(có) phải* '(to exist) true' :

(4)   Nó   (có) **phải**   là   sinh viên   (hay)   không ?
      he   (exist) true   be   student   or   Neg.
      Is he a student ?

Why in (4), is the particle *không* acceptable when it is not in (3) ? Because in (4), the reading of *không* is the same as *chăng*. Indeed, by referring to the affirmative term of the yes-no question, *không* has to be read as *không (có) phải* and not just as *không* in (3). But *không (có) phải* [literally: Neg. (to exist) true] turns out to be a negation that brings upon *(có) phải* '(to exist) true', the truth; *có* is optional because for all negation marked by *không* if not otherwise specified, it should be understood as a negation bringing upon *có* 'to exist' recoverable, that is a negation of existence. This allows us to say that *không* is equivalent to *không có*. This equivalence can be clearly shown by means of a yes-no question whose affirmative term is a sentence with verbal predicate:

(5)   Nó   (có)   chạy   không ?
      he   (có)   run   Neg.
      Does he run ?

Có is not obligatory in (5) but to answer "yes" to this question, we have to say *có* ; and this fact means that *có* is always there and recoverable. Furthermore, the negative answer to (5) is either *không* or *không có*. The contrast *yes/no* for (5) turns out to be *có/không* with *không* interpreted as *không có*. In sum, two types of predicate-phrase should be distinguished, verbal predicate and nominal predicate; verbal predicate is negated by *không (có)* while nominal predicate, marked by the copula *là*, is negated by *không (có) phải*. With regard to the synomyny between (2) and (4), it may be said that *chăng* is semantically equivalent to *không (có) phải*.

Taking into account the respective semantics of *có* 'to exist' and *phải* 'true', the distinction *negation of existence/negation of truth* corresponding to the contrast of *không/chẳng* equivalent to that of *không (có)/không (có) phải*, is well founded. It is to be noted that a judgement of truth is second with respect to a judgement of existence in the sense that the former should be performed through the latter marked by *có*. The distinction of these two types of negation corresponding to *chẳng* and *không* is confirmed by other phenomena.

2.2. Double negation

In rhetorical questions, double negation is realized with *chẳng*, not with *không*. (6) is well-formed while (7) is not because in the last sentence, *chẳng* is replaced by *không* :

(6) Nó **chẳng** không quen với mày hay sao ?
     he   chẳng không know with you or how
     Isn't he one of your acquaintances ?

(7) *Nó **không** không quen với mày hay sao ?

In (7), replace *không* by *không phải* 'Neg. true', we shall obtain (8), a well-formed sentence semantically equivalent to (6) :

(8) Nó **không phải** không quen với mày hay sao ?
     il   Neg. true   Neg. know with you or how
     Isn't it true that he is one of your acquaintances ?

The comparison of (6) with (8) confirms once more the equivalence between *chẳng* and *không phải*.

2.3. Interro-negative

Interro-negative is possible with the negation of truth *chẳng*, or its equivalent *không (có) phải*, not with the negation of existence *không*. Compare (9) to (10) and (11) :

(9) Mày không uống rượu (hay) **chẳng** ?
     you Neg. drink wine or   chẳng
     Don't you drink wine ?

(10) *Mày không uống rượu (hay) **không** ?
     you Neg. drink wine or   không

(11) (Có) **phải** mày không uống rượu (hay) **không** ?
     exist true you Neg. drink wine or   không
     Is it true that you don't drink wine ?

In (11), the final particle *không* is to be read as *không (có) phải* — a negation of truth — by referring to the affirmative term of the question; in (10), the same *không* is to be interpreted as *không có* — a negation of existence. Once more, the semantic equivalence between *chẳng* and *không (có) phải* is clearly established, actually because (9) and (11) are synonymous.

2.4. Không, chẳng *and prohibitive negation*

To express negative imperatives, Vietnamese uses the auxiliaries *đừng* or *chớ* :

(12) Đừng đi / chớ đi
     Don't go

In modern Vietnamese, *đừng/chớ* can be replaced by *không*, not by *chẳng* :

(13) *Không đi*
Don't go

(13') **Chẳng đi*
Don't go

The possible substitution of *đừng/chớ* by *không* — and the impossible use of *chẳng* as a negative imperative — means that the prohibitive is a kind of negation of existence, not a negation of truth. On the one hand, *chẳng* serves to negate the truth of an object whose existence is suspended if not assumed to be well established. On the other hand, *không* 'empty' signifies the void of an object; this explains the potentiality of *không* to mark a prohibitive negative which consists of maintaining an object in the void and therefore to interdict it to come into existence.

3. Negation and quantification

Until now, we have discussed *không* in its uses as a negative particle, especially as a preverbal auxiliary. But *không* can also function as a nominal determiner. As such, *không* is considered to be a zero quantifier :

(14) *kẻ   không   nhà*
person   zero   house
homeless person

Moreover, the Vietnamese equivalent for number zero is *số không* 'number, empty'. In (14), we can naturally add *có* 'to exist, to have', but then instead of a lexical compound unit, we will have a noun phrase or a sentence, ex. (15), whose main verb is *có* 'to have':

(15) *kẻ   không   có   nhà*
person   Neg.   have house
the person who is homeless

In (15) where the main verb is *có* 'to have', *không* and *chẳng* are interchangeable but in (14) only *không* is acceptable. That means that *không* as semantically equivalent to *không có* 'Neg. exist' can be used as a nominal quantifier while *chẳng* having no such reading cannot function as a quantifier. Therefore, it is not surprising that the expression *số chẳng* 'number zero' is not acceptable in Vietnamese. This contrast between *không* and *chẳng* confirms once more our analysis that *không* and *chẳng* are two different types of negation, one bringing upon the quantity (the existence), the other upon the quality (the truth).