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 chẳng, 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 declarative 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) chẳng?
   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 **chăng/chạng** is used to deny a truth. This will be clear in (4) where if we do not replace **không** by **chằng**, 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 (cô) 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 synonymy 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/chạng** 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 **chạng** and **không** is confirmed by other phenomena.
2.2. Double negation

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

(6) Nô chằng không quen với may hay sao?
he chằng không know with you or how
Isn’t he one of your acquaintances?

(7) *Nô không không quen với may hay sao?

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

(8) Nô không phải không quen với may 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 chằng and không phải.

2.3. Interro-negative

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

(9) Mây không uống rƯp (hay) chằng?
you Neg. drink wine or chằng
Don’t you drink wine?

(10) *Mây không uống rƯp (hay) không?
you Neg. drink wine or không

(11) (Cô) phải may không uống rƯp (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 (cô) 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 chằng and không (cô) phải is clearly established, actually because (9) and (11) are synonymous.

2.4. Không, chằng and prohibitive negation

To express negative imperatives, Vietnamese uses the auxiliaries dưng or chô:

(12) Dưng đi / chô đi
Don’t go
In modern Vietnamese, ðùng/cho can be replaced by không, not by chẳng:

(13) Không đi
Don’t go

(13’) *Chẳng đi
Don’t go

The possible substitution of ðùng/cho 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).