

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

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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 khát
[you be-thirsty]
You are thirsty

Anh khát, 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.}

Although the "có" is most commonly found directly before the verb in an interrogative construction, the "có...không" pattern can often surround just the element being questioned, such as a verb modifier:

Anh hát hay
[You sing beautiful]
You sing well

Anh hát có hay không?
[You sing part. beautiful neg.]
Do you sing well?
(questioning just the "well")

A particularly notable effect of "không" reveals itself when it is combined with a wh-question structure. Wh-words used in Vietnamese are often inserted in their standard order within a sentence, without a frontal movement.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| a) Anh đi bưu điện | Anh đi đâu? |
| [you go post-office] | [you go where] |
| You're going to the post office. | Where are you going? |

The addition of a final "không" can change the entire interrogative. This topic will be further explored later in this paper.

- b) Anh đi đâu không?
[you go where neg.]
Are you going anywhere?

4. Word order and scope of negatives and interrogatives

In a sentence where the verb contains a modifier, a negative construction must have "không" placed again in a preposition relative to the entire verb phrase. For an interrogative "có...không" construction, the particle "có" must appear in the same slot. The verb and its modifier cannot be separated.

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| a) Subject +không +modifier +verb | - Negative |
| b) Subject +có +modifier +verb +không? | - Interrogative |
| c) *Subject +modifier +có +verb +không? | - Ungrammatical |

Chị có hay hát karaoke không?
 [you part. often sing karaoke neg.]
 Do you often sing karaoke?

*Chị hay có hát karaoke không?
 (Is it singing karaoke that you often do?)

But when a tense marker is present in an interrogative or a negative sentence, the tense marker is outside the “có...không” construction.

Interrogative with tense:

- d) Subject + tense + có + verb + không
- e) *Subject + có + tense + verb + không

Negative with tense:

- f) Subject + tense marker + không + verb + object
- g) *Subject + không + tense marker + verb + object

Examples: Tôi sẽ không đi được
 [I future neg. go be-able]
 I will not be able to go

*Tôi không sẽ đi được

It seems, from an initial investigation, that one cannot split serial verbs with a “có...không” construction.

Thus: *Subject + verb1 + có + verb2 + object + không.

Anh có muốn uống Coca không?
 [you part. want drink Coke neg.]
 Do you want to drink a Coke?

*Anh muốn có uống Coca không?

In multiple conjuncts: "cũng vậy" is a way to repeat the main clause's verb. It retains the positive/negative aspect, thus giving "không" scope over the second conjunct.

Clive không ăn kem và Điệp cũng vậy.
 [Clive neg. eat ice-cream and Điệp also thus]
 Clive didn't eat ice cream, and Điệp didn't either.

Thus, a positive construction:

Clive không ăn kem và Điệp cũng vậy
 [Clive ate ice cream and Điệp did too]

5. Pragmatics

We've seen that an interrogative sentence can be formed by several different methods using "không". Although semantically similar, the three have pragmatic differences that depend on response expectations in a speech situation. They can be summarized as follows:

- Sentence + final "không": Expectation of a positive response (or at least a yes/no situation)
- Sentence with "có...không" construction: No suspicion of the answer.
- Sentence with "có phải...không" construction: Requesting confirmation.

Particles and negation can be used pragmatically to indicate degrees of formality. Again, while semantically equivalent, the following two pairs have different degrees of formality, depending on the presence of the particle "có".

Equivalent: a) Tôi không có đi (more informal)
 b) Tôi không đi (more formal)

Equivalent: a) Hôm qua tôi có đi săn (more informal)
 b) Hôm qua tôi đi săn (more formal)

6. Focus Structure

One of the most interesting effects of “không” is the way it can change the focus structure, the presupposition, of a sentence. Focus structure, according to Lambrecht (1994), is the conventional association the of distribution of information with a sentence form. When a speaker utters a sentence, it can contain new information and background information. The background information, called the presupposition, is knowledge that is already shared, or assumed, between the speaker and the listener before the sentence was crafted. The focus, then, is any new information. Thus, in the sentence (and joke) "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?", there is a presupposition that the listener is someone who is currently beating his wife, thus creating a joke when the confused listener might reply "No!", which logically would indicate that he is still beating his wife.

A speaker will make a Pragmatic Assertion in a sentence, a proposition which the listener, from hearing the sentence, is expected to know or understand. All languages have methods for marking the focus and the presupposition. The focus is that which is unpredictable or unrecoverable from the context; what is information about a assertion is not just the focus itself but the association of that information with the set of assumptions that constitute the presupposition. (Van Valin, 1997:201)

With negation, the focus and the presupposition can be marked in syntactically equivalent English sentences by the use of intonation, indicated in bold in the following declarations:

- a) *Clive* didn't present the paper. (It was someone else)
- b) Clive didn't **present** the paper. (He mumbled it)
- c) Clive didn't present **the paper**. (He did a poster)
- d) Clive didn't **present the paper**. (He did nothing)

Presuppositions: There exists a person named Clive, a paper, and a conference. (depending)

Is it rice that you are eating? = Chị có ăn com, phải không?

To form the equivalent intonational phenomenon in a Vietnamese interrogative, a sentence must be marked with a tag question, then the speaker has to put stress (and a pause) on the word rice (com) to make it the focus. This technique does not seem to be common in Vietnamese. One also cannot use the "có...không" construction to just surround "com".

*Chị ăn có com không?

[You eat part. rice neg.]

A basic exercise of focus and presupposition can come from a simple exchange such as "Who hit me? John." The "John", by itself, is the focus, new information. At that point, there is a presupposition that someone did indeed hit me (Van Valin, 1997:201).

To translate the English sentence "Who ate ice cream? Hai.", the man's name ("Hai") would have to be complimented with the topic marker "à", producing "Ai đã ăn kem? Hai, à"

When asked to translate "It was Hai who ate the ice cream", my informant balked, claiming that she really could not translate this. One would have to say: "ồ, Hai ăn kem," employing another topic marker in a sentence-initial position, or say "Tôi nhớ ra rồi Hai ăn kem" meaning "I remember that Hai ate ice cream." There are several methods of questioning a negative. These are five construction attempts for "Did Hai not eat ice cream?", showing the different pragmatic uses of employing "không" with topic markers and using "không" twice in a sentence:

a) Hai không ăn kem, thật à?

[Hai neg. eat ice-cream real topic-marker]

{Tag question on the main clause, focus on the clause}

b) Không phải Hai ăn kem à?

[neg. true Hai eat ice-cream topic-marker]

{The initial "truth negative" puts the focus on Hai}

c) But: *Không phải Hai không ăn kem à?

[neg. true Hai neg. eat ice-cream topic]

{No tag questions in initial positions before a negative}

d) Hai có không ăn kem không

[Hai part. neg. eat ice-cream Neg.]

{Correct grammar but unusual}

e) Hai không ăn kem, phải không

[Hai neg. eat ice-cream truth neg.]

{This is usually how one questions a negative.}

6.1 Presupposition with “có”

With a “có...không” construction surrounding the entire sentence, all information seems to be within the domain of the focus; there are no presuppositions.

a) Có em Bích ở nhà không? = Is (a) Miss Bích home?

b) Có Mark ở đó không = Is (a) Mark there?

Both of these seem to have no presupposition of Bích or Mark.

But with the “có...không” construction outside of the subject, surrounding just the predicate, the subject takes a presupposition.

c) Mark có ở đó không? = Is (a) Mark there?

{This has presupposition on Mark.}

d) Can't say: *Mark ở có đó không (ungrammatical)

*Em Bích ở có nhà không? (ungrammatical)

“Có...không” seems to be able to surround many elements. Another contrast exists between it and a “phải không” tag question, which also assumes presupposition.

- e) Có ông Ba nói tiếng Tàu không?
= Does (a) Mr. Ba speak Chinese?
{There is no presupposition that a Mr. Ba exists.}
- f) Có ông Ba nói tiếng Tàu, phải không?
= Mr. Ba speaks Chinese, no?
{There is presupposition on Mr. Ba.}

A movement of the negative construction to the front of the sentence also affects the presupposition.

- g) Không phải chị ăn cơm = It's not you who eat the rice.
(with a presupposition that there was a question over
who was eating the rice)

6.2 Presupposition with không and wh-words

Perhaps the most interesting phenomenon is when “không” is combined with wh-type interrogative words. In a sentence with “không” but without an interrogative word, such as:

- a) Chị có muốn uống không? = You don't want to drink?
[you part. want drink neg.]

there is a presupposition. A drink exists and the speaker is asking if you want to drink it. In an interrogative construction without “không”, such as:

- b) Chị muốn uống gì? = What do you want to drink?
[you want drink what]

there is a presupposition that the listener wants a drink, and the speaker is asking about its nature. However, when “không” and an interrogative word are combined in a sentence, such as:

- c) Chị có muốn uống gì không?
 [you part. want drink what neg.]
 Do you want to drink anything?

there seems to be no presupposition in this sentence beyond the concept that there is a listener. No drink or want (for a drink) exists.

The use of "không" with the other wh- interrogative words produces similar results.

- d) Ở đó có ai không? = Is anybody there?
 [at there part. who neg.]
 {using "who" -- No presupposition of someone being there}
- e) Anh định đi đâu không = do you intend to go anywhere?
 [you process-of go where neg.]
 {Using "where" -- No presupposition of destination or plan}
- f) Tôi không định đi đâu cả
 [I neg. process-of go where at-all]
 I haven't planned to go anywhere
 {negative VP with "where". No presupposition of destination}
- g) Tôi định không đi đâu cả = I intend not to go anywhere.
 [I process-of neg. go where at-all]
 {"không" splitting serial verbs with "where".
 No presupposition of destination}

The other wh-words seem to have different effects:

- f) Chị biết nấu món đó như thế nào không?
 Do you know how to cook that?
 {using "how"}
- g) Chị biết tại sao không? = Do you know why?
 {using "why"}

While the position of “không” is regulated in sentences, its scope is quite prolific . I've shown that it can focus on various elements within a stream, limiting its influence to a single item or negating and questioning the entire speech act. Its position often reflects a pragmatic move by the speaker, one in which the speech situation much be taken account. Clearly, there is much more work to be done on the effects of "không" on presupposition, on the nature of information structure in negative and non-negative Vietnamese constructions.

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