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

Nguyễn Phú Phong
EHESS-CNRS/CRLAO and Université Paris 7, France

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

Kinh 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, kinh has become a regular negative particle in Vietnamese, and replaces chăng of Vietnamese origin. The grammaticalization of kinh 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 chăng by kinh? Did kinh bring something more with regard to negation? To answer this question, we will relate the opposition of chăng/kinh to that of two types of negation, negation of truth and negation of existence.

1. The chăng/kinh contrast

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

1.1. Yes-no questions using sentences with nominal predicate

Chăng or rather its allomorph chăng, contrary to kinh, 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) 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 *chăng/chàng* is used to deny a truth. This will be clear in (4) where if we do not replace *không* by *chàng*, 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 *chàng*. 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 synonymy between (2) and (4), it may be said that *chàng* 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/chàng* 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 *chàng* 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 may hay sao?
he chẳng không know with you or how
Isn’t he one of your acquaintances?

(7) *Nó 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) Nói 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 chẳng and không phải.

2.3. Interro-negative

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

(9) Mây không ương ruộ (hay) chẳng?
you Neg. drink wine or chẳng
Don’t you drink wine?

(10) *Mây không ương ruộ (hay) không?
you Neg. drink wine or không

(11) (Cô) phải may không ương ruộ (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 cô — a negation of existence. Once more, the semantic equivalence between chẳng and không (cô) 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, òng/chô can be replaced by không, not by chăng:

(13) Không di
    Don’t go

(13’) *Chăng di
    Don’t go

The possible substitution of òng/chô by không — and the impossible use of chăng as a negative imperative — means that the prohibitive is a kind of negation of existence, not a negation of truth. On the one hand, chăng 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) ké không nhà
    person zero house
    homeless person

Moreover, the Vietnamese equivalent for number zero is sô 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) ké không có nhà
    person Neg. have house
    the person who is homeless

In (15) where the main verb is có ‘to have’, không and chăng 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 chăng having no such reading cannot function as a quantifier. Therefore, it is not surprising that the expression sô chăng ‘number zero’ is not acceptable in Vietnamese. This contrast between không and chăng confirms once more our analysis that không and chăng are two different types of negation, one bringing upon the quantity (the existence), the other upon the quality (the truth).
4. A tentative conclusion

The grammaticalization of không \( \ddot{s} \) 'empty, void' of Chinese origin into a negative particle in Vietnamese began in the 17th century and coincided with the numerous arrivals in Vietnam of Western businessmen. Không took over chúng as a negative particle at the beginning of the 20th century, at the same time as France established her rule in this country. These two facts suggest one thing: Vietnamese had finally invented the number zero số không which is crucial to business. Indeed, before số không no other term is found to render “zero”. But what deserves to be noted here is the relation between the quantifier zero and the verbal particle không which has developed into another type of negation from that of chúng.

It will be noted also that prohibitives are marked as a negation of existence and that in a double negation, one should be a modal negation, bringing upon a judgement of quality (true or not) and not upon a consideration of quantity (exist or not). It will be interesting to see how these data specific to Vietnamese work in other languages.

5. Negation in some of the Việt-Mường languages

With regard to negation, it will be noteworthy to have a look at some of the Việt-Mường languages. In Mường, a language very close to Vietnamese, chúng is still the main negation particle. But in Nguồn, another Việt-Mường dialect, không is the attested negation auxiliary. Some of the small Việt-Mường dialects, such as Arem (population: 80), Ruc (population: 200) use neither chúng nor không as a negative particle but vắng which means “absence”.

Many authors (H. Maspero, 1912; J. Cuisinier, 1951) consider Nguồn, Arem and Ruc as different Mường dialects, implying that the Nguồn people living in Quảng Bình province are of Mường origin. Other authors, mostly Vietnamese (Nguyễn Dương Binh, 1975; Nguyễn Khắc Tường, 1975) use family registers and housing characteristics to prove that Nguồn were Vietnamese, natives of the neighboring northern provinces of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh. These people to avoid war and troubles, emigrated to the present mountainous area of Quảng Bình around the 17th century. In this discussion on the origin of the Nguồn people, do the remarks on negation help to give an adequate answer?
Bibliography


NGUYỄN Dương Bình. 1975. Về thành phần dân tộc của người Nguồn [On the ethnic membership of the Nguồn people]. In Việt Dân Tộc Học [Institute of Ethnology], Về vấn đề xác định thành phần các dân tộc thiểu số ở miền Bắc Việt Nam [On the problem of determining ethnic membership of minority groups in northern Vietnam]. Hà Nội : Nxb KHXH.

NGUYỄN Khắc Tùng. 1975. Gộp phân tích hiểu thành phần tộc người của người Nguồn qua những nhận xét về nhà ở của họ [A contribution to the study of the ethnic membership of the Nguồn people through their housing characteristics]. In Việt Dân Tộc Học, Về vấn đề xác định thành phần các dân tộc thiểu số ở miền Bắc Việt Nam [On the problem of determining ethnic membership of minority groups in northern Vietnam]. Hà Nội: Nxb KHXH.


