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A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS
OF THE CHINESE NEGATIVE FORMS: BU AND MéI (yóu)

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Introduction

Negation in Mandarin Chinese is a system that is quite complicated. But very few grammarians or linguists have made an effort to analyze the different negative forms in detail, and even fewer have carried out a discussion in terms of their semantic values. Some grammar books do not even mention them or they cover the whole question with a few remarks. (e.g. Chao, 1968; Lin, 1981)

However, language is created according to its intrinsic logic. If the Chinese negative forms are as simple as they are regarded, why should such a variety of markers exist and why can one not be replaced with the other without changing the meaning of the sentences in which they were embedded? Why will a beginning Chinese learner produce negative sentences that mark him as a non-native simply because he has shuffled the Chinese negative forms and put them in the wrong 'slot'? All these questions suggest that different Chinese negative forms carry their own sets of instructions that determine their usages.

Peirce held that the instructional meaning of a word is general, atemporal and subconsciously existing. All the interpreted meanings that are assigned to a word in specific contexts are the logical variants of the general instructional meaning of the word. Habit, the generalized set of instructions in Peirce's notion, is the essence of this meaning. It is this kind of generalization that is important to our understanding of words. In this theory, the different usages of the Chinese negative forms result in the invariant meaning of the individual forms. This paper is an effort to search for the invariant meaning of the two most common Chinese negative forms: bu and méi (yóu), and to investigate the different uses of these two negatives determined by their sets of instruction.

The Basic Usages of bu and méi (yóu)

Grammarians try to differentiate bu and méi (yóu) by saying that bu is neutral negation while "méi (yóu) is only a negative marker used with action verbs for the past tense or the perfective aspect." (Lang 1983:47) This theory
therefore can not account for the fact that méi (yǒu) is also used to negate the possessive and existential verb you which is obviously not an action verb. One easy way to get out of this difficulty is to say that méi and méi (yǒu) are two individual morphemes, and you is optional in méi (yǒu). Even for those grammarians who consider méi (yǒu) as a single morpheme, they can not solve the problem of its 'contradictory' usages. Therefore, they claim that méi (yǒu) is used to negate action verbs except before the stative verb you.

The author of this paper proposes that méi (yǒu) is one single morpheme and its applications are not inconsistent but determined by its invariant meaning. It is suggested that méi (yǒu) marks the negation of immediate existence, while bu, the negation of mediated existence. Immediate existence is something that exists in the concrete and factual world. It can be seen or touched in the physical reality and everyone will observe the same results without the requirement of any mental interaction such as inference. Such existence is recognized immediately since it is a plain fact. For instance, an action that has been completed is in immediate existence; so is the fact that there is a book on the desk or he has six brothers. The mediated existence differs from immediate existence in that it requires certain kind of mediation in the fulfillment of an action or a statement. For instance, actions that will happen in the future or modal verbs that imply personal attitude are examples of mediated existence. In other words, mediated existence is not a factual existence that can be reflected in the physical world. This opinion will be discussed in relation to the negation of action and non-action verbs, of adjectives, and of sentences with different aspect markers in the following sections.

**Negation of Action Verbs**

Both bu and méi (yǒu) can negate verbs of action, but the meanings carried by these two markers are different. Let us compare the following minimal pairs:

1. a. tā bu hé chá
   3sg not drink tea
   S/He does not drink tea.
   S/He refuses/refused to drink tea.

   b. tā méi (yǒu) hé chá
   3sg not drink tea
   S/He did not drink tea.
   S/He hasn't drunk tea.

We can see that when bu and méi (yǒu) negate the statement "S/He drinks/drank tea", méi (yǒu) simply denies the fact
he did not drink tea". Let us look at some other examples:

2a indicates that he is/was not willing to give me money while 2b states the fact that he did not give money.

Chao (1968:782) explained "when applied to verbs of voluntary actions in the past, méi (yòu) is used for simple negation, while bu usually has the effect of 'would not'". Furthermore, "with acts of events, bu as a negation expresses some futurity." (Lang, 1983:47) Whatever explanations and examples were given, they all fit into our paradigm that méi (yòu) negates the immediate existence and bu, the mediated existence. When an action/event happened, it thereafter existed in reality, and became a fact. No mediation is required between the event and its existence. Therefore it is an immediate existence. méi (yòu) is applicable to all the action verbs and marks that the action did not happen, or has not happened. bu, on the other hand, cannot indicate the noncompletion of an act; it denies the existence that is mediated. If the event did not occur because of the subject's unwillingness or personal habit, we have to see the mediation of the subject's attitude, indicated by this specific negative marker bu, along with the unfulfillment of the action. If the event will not happen in the future, this event does not exist in reality in the first place, and therefore it is not an immediate fact. The future event exists in a plan, which is a mediator. This mediation of temporal aspect results in the use of the negative form bu.

To illustrate this point, let us look at some further examples:

3. *a. wǒmén bu tīng dào zhèige xiāoxi
   we not hear this news
   b. wǒmén méi (yòu) tīng dào zhèige xiāoxi
   we not hear this news
   We didn't hear/haven't heard this news.
The event of 'being heard' can not be mediated by the subject's will. It can only be a plain fact whether the news is heard or not. Therefore, the immediacy of its existence determines the only correct choice of the negative marker méi (yǒu).

4. a. wòmen bu ting zhèige xiāoxi
   we not listen this news
   We don't want to listen to this news.
   b. wòmen méi (yǒu) ting zhèige xiāoxi
   we not listen this news
   We didn't listen/haven't listened to this news.

When the word hear is replaced by listen, these two sentences work perfectly well. 4a again implies the subject's unwillingness to listen and 4b is a flat statement of the negation of the action of listening. Mediation in 4a is seen through the interaction of the subject's intention in not listening to the news and 4b is a mere negation of the action without any implied reason. This case is also true of some other verbs such as see/look (kan dao/kàn) and touch/feel (mō dao/mō).

These examples reveal the flaw of the previous grammar rules as stated by Li & Thompson (1981:424) "There are, however, no verbs that cannot be used with bu." Actually, hear takes méi (yǒu) instead of bu which is claimed to be able to negate any kinds of verbs.

5. a. zhèige lìbàiwǔ bu shàngkè
   this Friday not have-class
   (We) do/will not have classes this Friday.
   b. zhège lìbāiwǚ méi (yǒu) shàngkè
   this Friday not have-class
   (We) did not have classes this Friday.

The messages of these two sentences differ in that 5a refers to the event in the future, since bu can not deny immediate past existence. So this sentence must be spoken some day before Friday and 'this Friday' is a future time reference. 5b can only refer to a past event, and the sentence must be spoken on Saturday. Thus, 'this Friday' becomes a past time reference.

Things that happened in the past are obviously existential facts while things that will happen in future are not, and they can only be taken into account through the mediation of time. This minimal pair again supports the hypothesis that bu negates mediated existence and méi (yǒu), the immediate existence.

6. a. tàiyang bu chūlái
   sun not come out
   The sun is not going/willing to come out.
Whether the sun comes out or not is a natural phenomenon and is not usually considered to be the result of the sun's intention/willingness. That is the reason that 6a sounds strange to the natives and is usually starred as impossible or ungrammatical. But if we put it in a magic world or wonderland, it is not hard to picture the sun speaking to the people "you have done so many evil things, and I will not give you light any more." bu is perfectly grammatical in this situation, because the sun has its own control whether it is going to come out or not. If it does not, its own intention is playing its role and the mediation of its subjective attitude exists. That is exactly what bu instructs us to see. However in reality, the sun's coming out can only be an immediate existence, and therefore bu is not a possible form of negation. Again it is congruent with our theory that when the sun's rising can be decided by the sun's subjective attitude, bu is correct, while this possibility is eliminated, bu becomes unacceptable in the same sentence.

Negation of Non-action Verbs

It is claimed, as mentioned before, méi (yóu) does not negate stative verbs except the verb yóu. The mediation and immediacy theory proposed in this paper may shed light on the underlying reason of this seeming contradiction. Action is particular, and an action that is completed is a solid fact that becomes part of the immediate reality. But stative verbs or other non-action verbs usually tell people to look at it in some kind of mediation. For example:

7. tā shì wàng jiàoshòu
    3sg be wàng professor
    He is Professor Wang.

Being Professor Wang is meaningless unless you know the referent of the particular name. Therefore, the verb to be does not belong to the concrete physical existence.

8. tā zhīdào zěngyàng kāi chē
    3sg know how drive car
    S/He knows how to drive a car.

Knowledge is always mediated since you need to rely on other linguistic sources to claim your knowledge. You need to employ your linguistic competence to clarify or illustrate your knowledge to show that you know it. Language is a mediation to indicate the existence of your knowledge and oftentimes you realize that you do not really know what you think you know when you try to explain it.
All these sentences have to use **bu** to mark the negation of the stative verbs.

But when we say:

9. tā méi yǒu qián  
   3sg not have money  
   He has no money.

we see the money and his possessing it more as a fact, and the existence of the money does not require any mediation.

The model verbs, conveying the mood of the subjects, no doubt indicate mediated existence. Modal verbs denote the subject's ability, intention, or obligation. They do not indicate something that exists in the physical world. Therefore **bu** is the only possible negative marker. For instance:

10. a. ni bu néng táoxué  
    you not can escape class  
    You can not play truant.  

*b. ni méi (yǒu) néng táoxué*

**Negation of Adjectives**

Adjectives are modifiers of nouns, and they categorize nouns in certain groups. When we say "he is tall", or "tā gāo" (he tall) in Chinese, we are classifying him to be one instance of the characteristics of tallness. He is not equal to tallness, nor is tallness the only feature he has. Therefore adjectives are not absolute facts. According to our theory, this kind of mediated existence should be negated by **bu**, and in the vast majority of the cases, this is true. For instance:

11. a. tā bu nénggàn  
    3sg not capable  
    S/He is/was not capable.  

*b. tā méi (yǒu) nénggàn*

But consider the following minimal pair:

12. a. tā bu pàng  
    3sg not fat  
    S/He is/was not fat.  

b. tā méi (yǒu) pàng  
    3sg not fat  
    S/He did not get fat. (gain weight)  
    S/He has not gotten fat.

When the sentence is negated by **bu**, it indicates that the subject is not related to the characteristic of fatness, but when **méi (yǒu)** is used, fat becomes a verb meaning
'getting fat'. It is not categorization any more. Again méi (yǒu) denies the plain fact of his getting fat.

Negation of Sentences with Inceptive Aspect -qǐlái

An event undergoes different stages after it occurs, such as its start, its progressiveness, and its completion. "In Chinese, each of these states is specified by adding one or more appropriate aspect markers around the nucleus of a predicate." (Tiee, 1986:110) Let us first look at the inceptive aspect marker qǐlái. It would be assumed that something that started to happen existed in reality and the proper negative marker would be méi (yǒu).

13. a. tā méi (yǒu) chàng qǐlái
   3sg not sing qǐlái
   S/He did not start singing.
   *b. tā bu chàng qǐlái

But some other examples given by Peter Lang (1983) seem to provide another picture.

14."Tā bu kūqǐlái cái qùai ne
   he not cry-start would-be strange NE
   It would be strange if he doesn't start crying."

15."Nǐ bu mà tā, tā kū-bu-qǐlái
   You not scold him, he cry-not start
   If you don't scold him, there's no way he will start crying."

16. Nǐ màle tā, tā dào méi (yǒu) kūqǐlái
   you scold-PERF him, he unexpectedly did-not cry-start
   When you scolded him, he didn't start crying,
   (though I expected him to." (148)

Superficially these examples seem to contradict our theory, but, giving them a second thought, we will see they are the best evidence in support of our observation. Of sentences 14, 15, and 16, only 16 is a negation of the fact of his not having started to cry. If we substitute méi (yǒu) with bu here, the sentence would be unacceptable, since the context of the sentence (Unexpectedly he did not start crying, though you scolded him.) requires a factual negation and bu, as we have discussed, can not fulfill this task. Neither sentence 14, nor 15 marks the negation of the immediate existence of his starting to cry. Sentence 14 is the negation of a supposed condition, while sentence 15 indicated he would not be able to cry with the negative marker bu following a verb instead of preceding it. Therefore, the existence of his starting to cry has to go through certain kinds of mediation in these two sentences.
One feature we should notice is that when bu follows a verb in structures with inceptive marker qilái, it implies the meaning of not being able to complete the action. In other words, the structure "Verb bu qilái" means "not be able to Verb qilái". That is why bu is used with qilái only in this pattern, while the ordinary pattern "bu Verb qilái" is incorrect, nor is "Verb méi (yòu) qilái". That is to say, in structures with the inceptive marker qilái, bu cannot appear before a verb and méi (yòu) cannot appear after a verb because of the inherent meaning carried by the two structures. One more example is listed below:

17. dēng liàng bu qìlái
    light/lamp light not qilái
    The light/lamp is not able to be lit up. (The light/lamp doesn't work.)

Another fact which supports our theory is that bu rather than méi (yòu) should be used in any kinds of conditional clauses. For instance:

18. a. rúgūo tā bu lái, wǒ jiù dǎ diànhuà gěi tā
    if he not come I will call phone to him
    If he does not come, I'll call him.

   *b. rúgūo tā méi (yòu) lái, wǒ jiù dǎ diànhuà gěi tā

   Since his not coming is a supposed condition in the future, méi (yòu) turns out to be an unacceptable negative marker.

Negation of Progressive Aspect

The progressive aspect marker in Mandarin Chinese is zài. With this aspect, the action is mediated by time. To illustrate, the continuing of the action is inseparable from time aspect. The progressive aspect marker sets the constraint that the action must be seen as an ongoing event at the specific point of time stated.

19. zuòtiān wǎnshàng tā bu zài xiěxìng
    yesterday evening 3sg not zai write-letter
    S/He was not writing letters yesterday evening.

20. wǒmén bu zài kàn bàozhǐ
    we not zai read newspaper
    We are not reading newspapers.

21. míntiān nèi shíhòu tā bu zài shuǐjiāo, tā yǐ
    tomorrow that time he not zai sleep he already get
    up le
    He won't be sleeping at that time tomorrow. He will have been up (already).

In all the above sentences, méi (yòu) is incorrect since
the action is mediated by time.

**Negation of Sentences with le and gùo**

In negative sentences le is incompatible with méi (yǒu), and gùo incompatible with by. In order to understand why this should be the situation, we need first examine the difference between le and gùo. Grammarians have labeled le as perfective marker and gùo as experiential aspect marker. We can have an idea about their differences from the examples given by Li and Thompson (1981:227-228)

22. "a. nǐ kàn jiàn le wǒ de yǎnjìng ma? you see perceive PERF I GEN glasses Q  
   Have you seen my glasses (recently, around here?) 
   I can't find them? 
   b. nǐ kàn jiàn gùo wǒ de yǎnjìng ma? you see perceive EXP I GEN glasses Q  
   Have you ever seen my glasses?

23. "a. tà qùnìán dào zhōngguó qu le  
   3sg last year to China go PERF  
   S/He went to China last year. 
   b. tà qùnìán dào zhōngguó qu gùo  
   3sg last year to China go EXP  
   S/He went to China last year.

The final picture generated by these two examples is the same. But sentences a and b indicate different intentions of the speaker and different underlining meanings. 22a asks the question because the speaker is looking for the glasses, while 22b just asks the fact whether or not you have ever seen the glasses. 23a indicates the action has some present effect and it is possible that he is still in China. But 23b informs us that he had the experience of going to China last year and now it is over. S/He is now back. The distinction is therefore clear that le is more mediated through time and gùo simply denotes a past experience. It can be confirmed by the fact that le can be used in the future time while gùo can not:

24. a. wōmén míntiān fāng jiā le  
   We will have(begin) our vacation tomorrow. 
   *b. wōmén míntiān fāng gùo jiā

An event that has not happened yet can not be regarded as an experience, and thus the experiential aspect is impossible. In conclusion, le instructs you to see a completed action mediated by particular time references, and gùo only tells an event that has been experienced before. Consequently, by can negate sentences with le, but méi (yǒu), which is the only negative particle for
experiential aspect gué, can not.

25. *a. tā ｂu ｚòu ｇùo ｆēijī
   3sg not sit guo plane
  b. tā ｍéi (ｙǒu) ｚòu ｇùo ｆēijī
   3sg not sit guo plane
He hasn't taken a ride on a plane. (He does not
have the experience of riding on a plane.)

This example also supports our observation that ｍéi (ｙǒu)
is the only proper negative in sentences with ｇｕò, which
indicates a plain past experience.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes the two most common Chinese negative
forms ｂu and ｍéi (ｙǒu) semantically. The semantic analysis
of the linguistic forms reveals that all the interpreted
meanings of a single linguistic form are in harmony with
its invariant meaning. And the semantic analysis provides
us with access to the problem of Chinese negatives that no
any other approaches otherwise can. We observed that ｂu is
used to negate the mediated existence and ｍéi (ｙǒu), the
immediate existence. All the variations of their usages
center around their own sets of instruction. The semantic
values of these little markers further manifest that all
language phenomena are essentially meaning-oriented. "Only
the study of meaning, which is after all the final cause
universally shared by all languages, can permit us to come
to an understanding of the nature of language." (Robertson,
1987:15) The study of meaning is the only way to solve the
problems of language controversies, and it can be applied
to tackle other problems in Chinese that appear confusing
and unexplainable, and have long been considered
unsolvable.
References


