A Semantic Analysis of the Chinese Negative Forms: BU and Méi (Yŏu)

Zhou Yun

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol14/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS
OF THE CHINESE NEGATIVE FORMS: BU AND MÉI (YŌU)

Zhou Yun
Brigham Young University

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 (yōu), and to investigate the different uses of these two negatives determined by their sets of instruction.

The Basic Usages of bu and méi (yōu)

Grammarians try to differentiate bu and méi (yōu) by saying that bu is neutral negation while "méi (yōu) 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 hē chá
   3sg not drink tea
   S/He does not drink tea.
   S/He refuses/refused to drink tea.

   b. tā méi (yǒu) hē 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
of his drinking tea without implying any additional reasons. It is simply an immediate flat statement of fact. But when \textit{bu} substitutes for \textit{méi (yóu)}, the negation goes beyond the denial of plain facts. It can never indicate "he did not drink tea". Let us look at some other examples:

2. a. \textit{tā bu gěi wǒ qián}
   3sg not give me money
   S/He won't give me money.
   S/He refused to give me money.

b. \textit{tā méi (yóu) gěi wǒ qián}
   3sg not give me money
   S/He didn't give me money.
   S/He hasn't given me money.

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, \textit{méi (yóu)} is used for simple negation, while \textit{bu} usually has the effect of 'would not'". Furthermore, "with acts of events, \textit{bu} as a negation expresses some futurity." (Lang, 1983:47)

Whatever explanations and examples were given, they all fit into our paradigm that \textit{méi (yóu)} negates the immediate existence and \textit{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. \textit{méi (yóu)} is applicable to all the action verbs and marks that the action did not happen, or has not happened. \textit{bu}, on the other hand, can not 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 \textit{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 \textit{bu}.

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

3. a. \textit{wǒmén bu tīng dào zhèige xiāoxi}
   we not hear this news

b. \textit{wǒmén méi (yóu) 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. wǒmén bu tīng zhèige xiǎoxīi
   we not listen this news
   We don't want to listen to this news.

   b. wǒmén méi (yǒu) tīng zhèige xiǎoxīi
   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 (kàn dào/kàn) and touch/feel (mō dào/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 lìbàiwù bu shàngkè
   this Friday not have-class
   (We) do/will not have classes this Friday.

   b. zhège lìbàiwù 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. tàiyáng bu chūlái
   sun not come out
   The sun is not going/willing to come out.
b. tài yáng méi (yǒu) chū lái
sun not come out
The sun didn't/hasn't 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 (yǒu) does not negate stative verbs except the verb  yǒu. 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 wáng jiàoshòu
   3sg be wáng 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. **nǐ bu néng táoxué**
    
    you not can escape class
    
    You cannot play truant.

   *b. nǐ 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 gàō" (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**

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 mei (you) denies the plain fact of his getting fat.

Negation of Sentences with Inceptive Aspect -qīlāi

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 qīlāi. It would be assumed that something that started to happen existed in reality and the proper negative marker would be mei (you).

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

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

14."Tā bu kūqīlāi cái gūne 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-qīlāi
   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) kūqīlāi
   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 mei (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 qǐlái, it implies the meaning of not being able to complete the action. In other words, the structure "Verb bu qǐlái" means "not be able to Verb qǐlái". That is why bu is used with qǐlái only in this pattern, while the ordinary pattern "bu Verb qǐlái" is incorrect, nor is "Verb méi (yōu) qǐlái". That is to say, in structures with the inceptive marker qǐlái, bu cannot appear before a verb and méi (yōu) 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 qǐlái
   light/lamp light not qǐlái
   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 (yōu) should be used in any kinds of conditional clauses. For instance:

18. a. rǔgōu tā bu lái, wǒ jiù dà diànhuà gěi tā
   if he not come I will call phone to him
   If he does not come, I'll call him.
   *b. rǔgōu tā méi (yōu) lái, wǒ jiù dà diànhuà gěi tā

Since his not coming is a supposed condition in the future, méi (yōu) 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 wǎnshèngg tā bu zài xiěxìng
   yesterday evening 3sg not zài write-letter
   S/He was not writing letters yesterday evening.

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

21. míntiān nèi shíhòu tā bu zài shuǐjiào, tā yǐ qíchuǎng le
   tomorrow that time he not zài 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 (yōu) is incorrect since
the action is mediated by time.

Negation of Sentences with le and guo

In negative sentences le is incompatible with mei(you), and guo incompatible with by. In order to understand why this should be the situation, we need first examine the difference between le and guo. Grammarians have labeled le as perfective marker and guo 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. ni kan jian le wo de yanjing ma?
   Have you seen my glasses (recently, around here?)
   I can't find them?
   b. ni kan jian guo wo de yanjing ma?
   Have you ever seen my glasses?

23. "a. ta qunian dao zhongguo guo qie
   S/He went to China last year.
   S/He is now back. The distinction is therefore clear that le is more mediated through time and guo simply denotes a past experience. It can be confirmed by the fact that le can be used in the future time while guo can not:
   b. ta qunian dao zhongguo qie guo
   S/He went to China last year."

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 an completed action mediated by particular time references, and guo only tells an event that has been experienced before. Consequently, by can negate sentences with le, but mei(you), which is the only negative particle for
experiential aspect gué, can not.

25. a. tā bu zuò gùo fēijī
   3sg not sit guo plane
b. tā méi (yǒu) zuò 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 gùo, 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


