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Distribution differences of negation markers in Cantonese

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1 Introduction

Negation in Chinese is more complicated that their position in sentences are not fixed and their compatibility with aspectual markers varies one another (Zhuang & Liu, 2011). Several scholars (Ernest 1995; Cheng, Huang, & Tang, 1997; Lin, 2003) also studied the negation markers of Mandarin with regard to the aspectual selection of them.

In Cantonese, there are four different negation markers, namely *m4* 唔, *mou5* 冇, *mei6* 未 and *mai5* 咪. They, in general, share similar meaning and can be translated as ‘not’ in English. However, it is found that their distributions differ in terms of semantics and syntax. Since Cheng et al. (1997) claimed that, in Chinese, matching or agreement is required between the negation marker and the form of aspect or verb, it might be the case that the diverse distributions of the negation markers of Cantonese in sentences are on account of the differences of aspectual selections. Therefore, this paper examines the variations of the usages of Cantonese negation markers in regard to their aspectual selections.

This paper is sectioned as follows. Following the introduction, section 2 is the empirical data regarding Cantonese negation markers and section 3 includes the analysis in terms of situation aspect and viewpoint aspect respectively. Section 4 comes to the conclusion of the paper.

2 Empirical data

Despite the fact that the meanings of four negation markers are alike, they show slight variations of the meanings of the sentences when they are put in the same surface sentence

structure, as example (1) illustrated. Interestingly, in (1d) and (1e), it is suggested that the negation marker *mai5* has the restriction on the subject.

- (1) a. 我唔跳舞。
[我不跳舞。]
- b. 我有跳舞。
[我沒跳舞。]
- c. 我未跳舞。
[我還沒跳舞。]
- d. *我咪跳舞。
[*我別跳舞。]
- e. (你) 咪跳舞。
[你別跳舞。]

Apart from the semantic differences, the four markers are distributed differently. Some of them are in complementary distribution in certain syntactic environments to convey different meanings, whereas some of them cannot appear in same construction, as shown in example (2).

- (2) a. 張三唔驚昆蟲。
[張三不害怕昆蟲。]
- b. *張三冇／未／咪驚昆蟲。
[*張三沒／還沒／別害怕昆蟲。]

Besides, as illustrated by example (3), the ability of the negation markers to be compatible with aspect markers like *gwo3* differ from one another, resulting in the dissimilar distributions of the negation words.

- (3) a. 你唔／冇／未／咪做兼職。

[你不／沒／還沒／別做兼職。]

- b. *你唔／咪做過兼職。

[*你不／別做過兼職。]

- c. 你有／未做過兼職。

[你沒／還沒做過兼職。]

In order to account for the disparity of Cantonese sentential negation markers, the following section further analyzes the above examples concerning two uses of aspect, namely situation aspect and viewpoint aspect.

3 Data analysis

3.1 The distributions of four negation markers in view of situation aspect

With reference to Mandarin *bu*, Lin (2003) argued that *bu* aspectually selects a non-event as its complement that the stative situation does not include change over time and thus no input of energy is required to understand the situation. Dai (2007) claimed that *bu* is for denying the existence of the state. These arguments can also account for the observation of *m4* in Cantonese, the counterpart of Mandarin *bu*, obtained from (2). Since the complement with a state verb 驚 denotes a psychological state of a person ‘being afraid of insects’, instead of an event, *m4* is thus permitted to precede the complement in (2a) to negate the meaning of the sentence.

According to Lin (2003), he also proposed that Mandarin *mei* requires an event as its complement regarding the aspectual selection. Lin (2003) and Dai (2007) shared the same perspective that *mei* should precede a complement that describes dynamic situation. Cantonese *mou5*, being equivalent to *mei*, shows the same distribution. As the complement in (2) does not denote the change of state, the use of *mou5* in (2b) is not permitted.

Besides, it is suggested that *mei6* have the same requirement as *mou5* on the selection of complement. As long as the complement is a non-state, it is felicitous to put them in same construction, as illustrated by (2b) as well. Two negation markers only differ in their semantic meanings that *mou5* indicates the reading of an event which did not happen or have not happened, while *mei6* contains the reading of the event that will probably happen in the future (Biq, 2015).

Some may argue that *m4* is also capable of taking a non-state verb as *mou5* and *mei6* do. However, this statement is not true. With respect to the proposal of Li and Thompson (1989) on the function of *bu* and *mei*, the complements they take are indeed dissimilar although they are seemingly put in the same construction. As illustrate in (1), 跳 is normally identified as a non-state verb. Nevertheless, the complement in (1a), instead of describing a dynamic situation, denotes a habitual behavior which is regarded as a state, and the use of *m4* expresses the denial of the habit of dancing. By contrast, the application of *mou5* and *mei6* is to negate the completion of dancing with subtle differences in meanings.

As for *mai5*, its meaning is same as 唔好, which is mostly used in imperative. If a subject precedes *mai5* in a clause, it should only be second person pronoun because *mai5* is used when the speaker wants to restrict the behavior of the one s/he is talking to. Hence, it explains the grammaticality of (1e) and (1f). Regarding the complement *mai5* takes, in addition to event, it shows the ability of taking stative situation in (4).

(4) 你咪信佢。

[你別相信他。]

3.2 The distributions of four negation markers in view of viewpoint aspect

In accordance with Matthews and Yip (1994), the use of aspect allows same situation to be interpreted dissimilarly while using different aspect markers. Besides, they stated that a total of six aspectual markers exists in Cantonese: *gwo1* (experiential), *zo2* (perfective), *gan2* (progressive), *zyu6* (continuous), *hoi1* (habitual) and *haa3* (delimitative). In this section, only the first three of them are discussed to examine the compatibility of the negation markers with markers of aspect.

Concerning *gwo3*, it is used to describe the situation happened earlier than the time of the sentence produced (Mathew & Yip, 1994). In (3), when the experiential marker *gwo3* is used, only *mou5* and *mei6* are capable of negating the meaning of the sentence. This is in line with the proposal that *mou5* and *mei6*¹ only take the event with change of state as their complement. Because of the event involved changing over time, *m4* is thus incompatible with experiential marker *gwo3*. Also, as (3b) illustrated, *mai5* is unable to occur with *gwo3*, it may be because the function of *mai5*, which is to prohibit the possible action that someone may take in the future, is contradicted the function of *gwo3* that is in relation with event prior to the speech time.

¹ It is also worth to note that *mei6* in this case is surprisingly compatible with the *gwo3* although they somehow are contradictory in meaning.

Moreover, Lin (2003) claimed that when Mandarin *le* accompanies with achievement, accomplishment or activity verb in a sentence, ‘the sentence denotes a completed or terminated event’ (p.436). When aspectual perfective marker *zo2* in Cantonese, the counterpart of *le*, appears in the sentence, it also demonstrates the same effect that it implies a completed event, as shown in (5a).

- (5) a. 張三輸咗畀李四。
[張三輸了給李四。]
- b. *張三唔／未／咪輸咗畀李四。
[*張三不／還沒／別輸了給李四。]
- c. 張三冇輸咗畀李四。
[張三沒輸了給李四。]

From (5), even though the complement is not a dynamic situation, *m4* fails to be compatible with perfective marker *zo2*, while *mou5* is the only negation marker that is able to occur with it, which was also mentioned by Cheng et al. (1997). This is explained by Law (2014) that *m4* and *mou5* mostly functions to negate non-perfective predicate and perfective predicate respectively.

Concerning the inability of *mei6* and *mai5* to accompany with *zo2*, it is suggested that the meaning of *zo2*, similar to *gwo3*, shows contradiction with the meanings of these two negation markers. *mei6* implies something not yet happened while *mai5*, as stated previously, is to restrict the action likely happened in the future. When both of them are functioned to negate the action that would happen, it is impossible for them to negate a situation that denotes a terminated event, even the subject of the sentence changed to second person pronoun.

As for the imperfective durative aspect marker *gan2*, if the predicate is perceived as an event, it is ungrammatical for *m4* followed by this predicate. Interestingly, if the copular verb 係 is inserted in the sentence as in (5b), the phrase 食緊飯 is rather considered as a stative situation, which corresponds to the restriction of *m4*. However, *bu*, the counterpart of *m4*, shows inability to take the complement with imperfective marker *zai*. Lin (2003) also explained the phenomenon.

In (5c), owing to the complement denoting a dynamic situation, *mou5* is compatible with the imperfective marker *gan2*. By contrast, same as the restriction for the perfective marker *zo2*, the contradiction in meanings may account for the incompatibility of *mei6* and *mai5* with *zo2*.

- (5) a. 你食緊飯。
[你在吃飯。]
- b. 你唔*(係)食緊飯。
[*你不在吃飯。]
- c. 你冇食緊飯。
[你沒在吃飯。]
- d. *你未／咪食緊飯。
[*你還沒／別在吃飯。]

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is found that the distribution of negation markers in Cantonese *m4*, *mou5*, *mei6* and *mai5* vary one another in light of their semantic meanings and aspectual selections.

Regarding *m4*, its complement is restricted to a non-event denoting stative situation or habitual behavior. It is not capable to take the predicate with either experiential marker *gwo3* or perfective marker *zo2*, but it can co-occur with the imperfective progressive aspect marker *gan2* only when copular verb 係 exists.

By contrast, *mou5* and *mei6* are required to accompany with the complement of a dynamic situation. They contain the meaning of ‘did not’/‘have not’ or ‘will not’ accordingly when negating sentences. *mou5* is able to be with all the markers of aspect discussed above, whereas *mei6* is solely capable of negating the complement with *gwo3*, but not *zo2* and *gan2*.

Lastly, *mai5* is more flexible that it can take most of the stative and dynamic situations with the selection on the subject that is necessarily second person pronoun owing to its nature of prohibition of others’ behaviors. It is noted that its inability of occurring with the three aspect markers is because the meaning of *mai5* shows contradiction with that of *gwo3*, *zo2* and *gan2*.

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