

Negation in Chinese: a theoretical overview

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In this paper we review some basic facts of negation in Mandarin Chinese as determined by syntax. A negative morpheme generally has its sister position, i.e., its complement, as its scope. The basic semantic function of negative morphemes is to give a complement set of the set denoted by the complement in its scope. In the case of phrasal or sentential negation, the complement set can be given by associating negation with one of constituents in the scope, the associated constituent being the focus of negation. Given the head first and right branching structure of the predicate phrase in Chinese, it is expected that a phrasal negative element, such as *bu* and *mei(you)* has the VP, i.e., its right sister, as its scope and that the constituents in its left are to be outside its scope. Constituents to the left of negative morphemes cannot be negated, i.e. cannot be the focus of negation, while those in the right of negation can.

There are some cases, however, in which constituents to the left of the negative morphemes appear to be in the scope of negation. In sentences such as ‘Shenme ye mei shuo.’ ((I) will not say anything.), the phrase ‘shenme ye’ appears to be in the scope of negation ‘mei’ in that it is interpreted as a negative polarity item, which is generally required to be in the scope of negation to be interpretable. We will show that phrases like these are not in the scope of negation, and that they are not negative polarity items and that the relevant interpretation can be obtained by treating them as universal quantifiers.

We will demonstrate that in Mandarin Chinese, and probably in other dialects of Chinese, the following holds, as are the case with other languages:

- A. Negation scope is the sister constituent of the negative morphemes.
- B. The focus of negation must be in the scope of negation.