

## Vietnamese Interrogative/Negative syncretism and beyond

Interrogative questions in Vietnamese are formed by the combination of an *optional* preverbal element (the assertion marker *có* and the perfect marker *đã*) and a post-verbal *không/chưa*:

- (1) a. Anh-ấy            (*có*)    đến    **không?**                    neutral  
       Brother-that    ASR    come    KHONG  
       ‘Did he come?’
- b. Anh-ấy            (*đã*)    đến    **chưa?**                    perfect  
       Brother-that    PERF    come    CHUA  
       ‘Has he come yet?’

As the contrast between (1a) and (1b) shows, questions with final *không* differ from questions with final *chưa* aspectually: the former simply asks about the truth of the proposition, whereas the latter asks whether the event denoted by the proposition has been realized.

There are three well-documented interesting properties of interrogative questions in Vietnamese.

First, the exact interrogative-related forms *không/chưa* can mark negation when they appear preverbally.

- (2) a. Anh-ấy            **không**                    đến                    neutral  
       Brother-that    KHONG                come  
       ‘He didn’t come.’
- b. Anh-ấy            **chưa**                    đến                    perfect  
       Brother-that    CHUA                    come  
       ‘He hasn’t come yet.’

Noteworthy, negative *không* and negative *chưa* also differ from each other aspectually: *không* simply negates the truth of the proposition, whereas *chưa* negates the realization of the event denoted by the proposition. That is to say, interrogative *không/chưa* correspond to negative *không/chưa* not only phonetically but also semantically despite their positional difference.

Second, the exact interrogative-related form *có* can also appear in assertive and negative contexts:

- (3) a. Anh-ấy            **có**                    đến                    neutral  
       Brother-that    ASR    come  
       ‘He did come.’
- b. Anh-ấy            **không**                    (*có*)    đến  
       Brother-that    KHONG                ASR    come  
       ‘He did not come.’
- c. Anh    ấy    (*có*)    đến    **không?**  
       Brother-that    ASR    come    CHUA  
       ‘Did he come?’
- (4) a. Anh-ấy            **đã**    (*có*)    đến                    perfect  
       Brother-that    PERF    come  
       ‘He has come.’
- b. Anh-ấy            **chưa**                    (*có*)    đến  
       Brother-that    CHUA                    ASR    come  
       ‘He has not come.’
- c. Anh-ấy            (*đã*)    (*có*)    đến    **chưa?**  
       Brother-that    PERF    ASR    come    CHUA  
       ‘Has he come yet?’

Examples in (3) and (4) indicate a striking parallelism of the speech acts which all involve the preverbal assertion marker *có*. Furthermore, the same aspectual distinction (neutral vs. perfect) is preserved across the board regardless of the illocutionary force (be it interrogative, negative or assertive).

Third, the only obvious distinction of interrogatives then is marked by the position of *không/chưa*, i.e., only in interrogatives, *không/chưa* must occur postverbally (or clause-finally, to be more precise).

To sum up, any successful analysis of interrogative questions in Vietnamese must be able to account for the complicated relationship between negative *không/chưa* and interrogative *không/chưa*: they are similar phonetically and semantically, but they are positionally different, and they are incompatible with each other (i.e., we cannot form negative interrogative questions by combining pre-verbal

