Vietnamese Interrogative/Negative syncretism and beyond

Interrogative questions in Vietnamese are formed by the combination of an *optional* preverbal element (the assertion marker $c\dot{o}$ and the perfect marker $d\tilde{a}$) and a post-verbal $kh\hat{o}ng/chwa$:

(1) a. Anh-ây (có) đến không? Brother-that come **KHONG ASR** 'Did he come?' b. Anh-ây (đã) đên chwa? 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 *chua* 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.

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

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

Second, the exact interrogative-related form $c\dot{o}$ can also appear in assertive and negative contexts:

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

Examples in (3) and (4) indicate a striking parallelism of the speech acts which all involve the preverbal assertion marker $c\dot{o}$. 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 successfull 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

negative $kh\hat{o}ng/chua$ with post-verbal interrogative $kh\hat{o}ng/chua$). Furthermore, they intimately interact with the assertion marker $c\acute{o}$ and the perfect marker $d\~{a}$ yielding the parallelism among assertive, negative and interrogative contexts.

There are three existing approaches to these data: Trinh (2005) – the homophonous approach, Duffield (2007) - the 'half-multifunctional' approach, and Duffield (2013) – the 'fully-multifunctinal' approach. None of these has satisfactorily account for the puzzling syncretism in Vietnamese. We show that by using nanosyntactic lexicalization algorithms (Baunaz & Lander 2018), we can adequately explain all of those intriguing properties.

In particular, we propose that there is a functional sequence in (5) with the lexical entries for the morphemes in (6):

- (5) f-seq: OR> NOT > (YET > PERF >) ASR > V (the YET and/or PERF layers are only built in the presence of the perfect aspectual interpretation)

Crucially, there is an assertive base [ASR] in all three contexts of assertives, negatives and interrogatives. Negatives and interrogatives are built on top of the assertive base, and differ from each other as to the amount of the f-seq they spell out. The superset principle enables us to account for the multifunctionality of these elements. In addition, the clause-final position of interrogative *không/chưa* is shown to be a result of spellout-driven movement. Our novel treatment of Vietnamese interrogative/negative markers is a demonstration of the advantage of a nanosyntactic approach in terms of explanatory adequacy. We also show that our nanosyntactic analysis can be extended crosslinguistically and historically since the negative-interrogative syncretism is not restricted to Vietnamese (Miestamo 2005). We end our paper by some final thoughts on the problems of spell-out and morpheme order (the PRE/POST distinction) (Starke 2018).

References

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