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# Beyond negation—the roles of *meiyou* and *bushi* in Mandarin conversation

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the negative markers *meiyou* and *bushi* (meaning 'not/no') in Mandarin conversation and, in particular, on their idiosyncratic use in spoken discourse. In this study, through close observation of actual conversation, I found that *meiyou* and *bushi* serve more functions than simply that of a response token 'no' to a question, and I identified their extra linguistic functions beyond negation. I explored their function in the light of Halliday's [Halliday, M.A.K., 1994. An Introduction to Functional Grammar. Edward Arnold, London] theory of three metafunctions of language, viz. the propositional, textual, and interpersonal functions. Cognitive and social principles, that is, Sperber and Wilson's [Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 1986. Relevance: Communication and Cognition. Blackwell, Oxford] theory of relevance and Brown and Levinson's [Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen C., 1987. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use. Cambridge University Press] politeness principle were applied as well, particularly to the textual and interpersonal functions. In particular, I observed from my data that, in Taiwan, Mandarin *meiyou* tends to be used to preface non-agreement and *bushi*, disagreement. Both of them are markers of a dispreferred second part in the adjacency relationship. This study suggests that *bushi* is basically a monosemous marker of denial; it retains the meaning of negation, conveys explicit negation in interaction, and encodes the speaker's attitudes toward the communicative world of the speech event; i.e., it is less referential (that is, focusing on the referential content of the message) and more expressive/subjective (that is, focusing on the speaker's beliefs or attitudes toward the event). *Meiyou*, on the other hand, is polysemous and is undergoing grammaticalization through the semantic–pragmatic recruitment of both subjectivity (to express and regulate beliefs, attitudes, etc.) and intersubjectivity (to make explicit the speaker's attitude to what is being said).

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## 1. Introduction

The roles of negation have aroused the interest of many philosophers, linguists and psychologists throughout the centuries. It was Aristotle who led the way to a more pragmatic understanding of negation by analyzing its use in natural language and logic. He analyzed singular negative statements and ambiguity in negation, a major issue in the study of presupposition. It was this language-based work by Aristotle that formed the basis for Horn's (1989) study of the history of negation. Horn focused on the scope of negation, especially problems that arise when negation co-occurs with quantifiers. Negation as a theoretical linguistic issue was studied largely within a transformation-generative framework by, for example, Lakoff (1970), Lasnik (1975), and Frawley (1992). However, most of their research employed made-up examples; thus, the textual and contextual meanings of negation were poorly considered or ignored. Recently, some scholars (e.g., Givón, 1979; Hopper and Thompson, 1980; Hwang, 1992; Jordan, 1998; Jefferson, 2002) have claimed that an understanding of negation can only be achieved by means of a truly pragmatic approach using real textual examples. Givón (1979) points out that in communication, while affirmatives are used to convey new information about which the hearer is assumed to be ignorant, negatives are used to correct misguided beliefs about which the hearer is assumed to be wrong. Hopper and Thompson (1980) propose that clauses marked by negative occur in the background portions of discourse. Hwang (1992), exploring the functions of negation in narrative discourse, concludes that negation can provide background information in discourse, deny an expectation within the local context of discourse, or mark a turning point or a high tension point at the global level. Discussing the contextual and textual power of negation, Jordan (1998) maintains that it is important for the study of relevance; to be specific, negative statements often provide information of great textual and contextual (as well as ideational) significance, or relevance, at a particular point in discourse. His study shows how important the wider context can be for understanding the 'meaning' of a negative statement, and how negation can affect remote statements. Jefferson (2002) investigates uses of the response-token 'no' by British and American speakers. His study suggests that this token is used differently by members of these two cultures: ubiquitously—as a 'continuer'—by the British, i.e., as a way of showing 'heard-and-understood' and giving support, agreement, sympathy, etc. (not only as an affiliation token but as an acknowledgement token) and selectively—as an 'affiliative'—by Americans.

Likewise, Chang (1997) and Huang (2000) look at the discourse pragmatics of negative markers in Taiwanese, one of Chinese dialects. Examining various functions of discoursal *bo* and *m* in spoken Taiwanese, Chang demonstrates the role of discourse pragmatics as a driving force for the emergence of functions and the gradual loss of negative meaning of these two negatives. Huang holds that Taiwanese *bo* and *m* are discourse markers which signal relations between units of talk through their sequential positions as initial or terminal brackets demarcating discourse units. To put it another way, *bo* and *m* in turn beginnings and turn endings are especially important since they display relevance to what has preceded and provide projections and connections for following turns. In addition, Yu (2004) investigates the various uses of the Mandarin Chinese negative *meiyou* in spoken