



The prosody of enhanced bias in Mandarin and Japanese negative questions

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Abstract

This paper examines the semantics of prosodic cues that enhance the bias meaning of negative polar questions in Mandarin Chinese and Japanese. We propose a semantic denotation for each phonetic phenomenon: Mandarin sentence-final stress marks the salience of the proposition with the opposite polarity to that of the surface proposition, while Japanese deaccentuation marks the givenness of the positive answer. The proposed semantics compositionally derives the observed discourse effects. The second part of the paper reports two naturalness rating experiments, which further support the empirical bases of our semantic analyses. Taken together, our study demonstrates the significant interaction between prosodic cues and contexts.

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1. Introduction

In Hamblin-style (1973) analysis of questions, a positive polar question and the corresponding negative polar question like (1) are predicted to have the same semantics, i.e., $\{p, \neg p\}$.

- (1) a. Is there a vegetarian restaurant around here?
b. Is there no vegetarian restaurant around here?

(Büring and Gunlogson, 2000)

However, the two questions in (1) have different meanings (Büring and Gunlogson, 2000). While (1-a) can be asked when the speaker has no bias, (1-b) should be used when the speaker has evidence against the proposition 'there is a vegetarian restaurant around here'. Thus, Büring and Gunlogson (2000) claim that these questions have different felicity conditions; a negative polar question like (1-b) requires evidence against p .

Similarly, Romero and Han (2004) observe that a preposed negative polar question like (2-a) has a bias toward the positive answer compared to the non-preposed one (2-b).

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- (2) a. Doesn't John drink?
Positive epistemic implicature: The speaker believes or at least expects that John drinks.
b. Does John not drink?
No epistemic implicature necessary.

(Romero and Han, 2004, pp. 609–610)

Although how the biased meaning arises from a negative polar question is still controversial (Ladd, 1981; Büring and Gunlogson, 2000; Creswell, 2000; Romero and Han, 2004; Reese, 2006), there is a general consensus that the negative polar question induces a bias meaning. For instance, Romero and Han (2004) hypothesize that preposed negation in English introduces a VERUM operator that generates the bias meaning as an implicature. Deriving bias in negative questions is beyond the scope of the current study, which focuses on the semantics of the prosody that enhances this bias. However, we speculate that the Gricean Quantity Principle or the Principle of Economy may be at work. That is, if positive and negative questions have identical semantics, then uttering the (usually shorter) positive version is more economical. Thus, if the speaker decides to use the negative question, there must be an extra message that the speaker wants to convey above and beyond the plain question meaning.

This paper points out and analyzes previously unnoticed means of constraining the felicity of negative polar questions in Mandarin Chinese and Japanese. In these two languages, the presence of an additional prosodic cue on a negative polar question requires a context where the speaker has stronger evidence that reinforces the bias, in contrast to questions without this additional cue. The paper first describes the relationship between the prosodic cues and the bias effects, and proposes our semantic analyses. We treat these prosodic cues as intonational features or morphemes that are paratactically associated to the sentence. That is, these prosodic features are not syntactically integrated in the structure; rather, they are floating morphemes that attach to sentences (Bartels, 1999). We then provide the lexical meanings that compositionally derive the desired interpretations of the negative polar questions, whereby information-seeking questions are turned into meta-discourse questions. Finally, we report two experiments which empirically support our observations and analyses.

This paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, we start with the basic observation and semantic analysis of Mandarin sentence-final stress. Section 3 deals with Japanese deaccentuation. Section 4 summarizes the introspection-based analyses of the two languages. In Sections 5 and 6, we report two experiments in which native speakers of Mandarin and Japanese judge the naturalness of the prosodic cues against contexts where the strength of the bias is manipulated. The results support the proposal that the addition of the prosodic cues requires a context where there is stronger evidence supporting the bias. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Mandarin sentence-final stress

This section presents introspection-based observations about the prosodic cues of enhanced bias in Mandarin Chinese. Prosodic stress that is normally placed on constituents to induce a focus interpretation can also appear in a sentence-final position. When sentence-final stress is used in a negative polar question, the question expresses that the speaker had a previous belief that the positive answer was true.

2.1. Introspection-based data

In Mandarin Chinese, prosodic stress on a constituent can indicate focus (c.f., Liu and Xu (2005) and Peng et al. (2006)). In (3), the subject NP *Weili* receives emphatic stress (marked as ES), which gives rise to a narrow focus on *Weili*; that is, (3) indicates that among the contextually salient alternative individuals, it is *Weili* that sells bacon, not the others.¹

- (3) [ESWei₅₁li₅₁] mai₅₁ la₅₁rou₅₁.
Weili sell bacon
'WEILI sells bacon.' (It is Weili, not others, that sells bacon.)

(adapted from Peng et al. (2006))

Phonetically, the emphatic stress is realized via expansion of the pitch range of focused syllables as well as post-focus compression, as depicted in Fig. 1 (taken from Peng et al. (2006)). Semantically, emphatic stress gives rise to alternative

¹ The subscript numbers in Mandarin example sentences indicate lexical tones: ₅₅ = high-level tone; ₃₅ = high-rising tone; ₂₁ = low-dipping tone; ₅₁ = high-falling tone. Those that do not have subscript numbers have no lexically specified tones.

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