

Verbs of Implicit Negation in Mandarin Chinese: An NPI-licensing Perspective

by

Yifa XU

Division of Humanities

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Abstract

Predicates with meanings like ‘avoid’ or ‘refuse’ are said to contain implicit negation because they carry certain semantic properties that are typical in a negative context such as licensing negative polarity items (NPIs). In previous studies on verbs of implicit negation (VINs) in Mandarin, the types of VINs being discussed are limited and the NPIs used for diagnostic tests are not diverse enough. In this thesis, I examine the syntactic and semantic properties of four major types of VINs in Mandarin, namely, the REFUSE-, REGRET-, STOP-, and REMOVE-type predicates, each taking a different type of complement and representing a specific type of implicit negation. Some nominal, verbal, and adverbial NPIs as well as the polarity-sensitive ‘X, yě Y’ ALSO construction are selected to test the NPI-licensing ability of each type of predicates.

I then classify these predicates into super-strong, strong, weak, and super-weak VINs based on the NPI-licensing test. This reveals a gradient spectrum of VINs in terms of the strength of effects of negation: at one end stand the REFUSE-type predicates such as *jùjué* (‘refuse’), which can license most kinds of NPIs, and at the other end the REGRET-type predicates such as *hòuhuǐ* (‘regret’), which do not license any NPIs. In between, STOP-type predicates like *tíngzhǐ* (‘stop’) and *kāishǐ* (‘start’) can license particular kinds of NPIs depending on their aspectual properties; REMOVE-type predicates such as *shānchú* (‘delete’) can license NPI *rèn hé* (‘any’) since they entail the non-existence of their objects. I further argue that the conceptual structure of these VINs relates to canonical negation in different ways, including entailing or presupposing a negative proposition, activating a negative proposition through

counterfactual thinking, or even more broadly, expressing the confrontation between two volitional forces. This study also suggests many verbal and adverbial NPIs are licensed by a conceptual structure of negativity that is embedded in the lexical meaning of a predicate or in a certain context.