

# Preliminary Observations of Metalinguistic Negation in Mandarin and Cantonese

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Understanding negation in natural language is essential to making judgements of the truthfulness and/or appropriateness of an utterance, but negation presents a picture much more complicated than its simple notation “~” in logic. One of the hottest debates on negation centers around ambiguity, which posits that there is ambiguity between internal (1a) and external negation (1b), and between descriptive (2a) and metalinguistic negation (2b) (Horn 1985, among many others). Assuming this divide is universal across languages, I hope to provide some linguistic evidence from Mandarin and Cantonese in this study.

This study aims to describe metalinguistic negation in Mandarin and Cantonese, with three research questions to be answered: i) do the two language varieties distinguish internal / external and descriptive / metalinguistic negation? ii) is there any ambiguity regarding the descriptive / metalinguistic divide in internal / external negation? iii) What are some ways of forming metalinguistic negation in Mandarin and Cantonese?

Although negators in both language varieties are very different (不 *bù* and 没 *méi* in Mandarin, according to Zhu (1982) and Lü (2002); 唔 *m4*, 冇 *mou5* and 未 *mei6* in Cantonese, according to Matthews & Yip (2011)), my findings indicate that both Mandarin and Cantonese draw a distinction between internal / external, as well as descriptive / metalinguistic negation. While internal negations are not ambiguous, external negations involving the use of 不是 *bú shì* / 唔係 *m4 hai6* ‘not be’ creates ambiguity between a metalinguistic and a non-metalinguistic reading. Using the combination *not be* is not the only way of forming metalinguistic negation. Utterance-final comments and the repetition of positive adjectives should also be read as an objection to the previous utterance.

## Examples

- (1) The present king of France is not bald.
  - a. There exists a present king of France, and s/he is *not* bald. (*Internal*)
  - b. There does not exist a present king of France who is bald. (*External*)
- (2) a. #The present king of France is not bald. He has a nice haircut. (*Descriptive*)
  - b. The present king of France is not bald. There is no king of France! (*Metalinguistic*)

## References

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