

Northern Vietnamese Negative Particle Questions: A Head-Movement Analysis

Introduction Negative Particle Questions (NPQs) are polar questions in which the question particle is prima facie homophonous with negation. We examine NPQs in Northern Vietnamese, (1), and argue that they are instead derived from negated sentences, (2), by Neg-to-C head movement.

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| (1) Minh chơi piano không ? | (2) Minh không chơi piano. |
| Minh play piano NEG? | Minh NEG play piano |
| “Does Minh play the piano?” | “Minh doesn’t play the piano.” |

While NPQs are negative questions, they are not associated with the bias commonly present for negated questions cross-linguistically because the language lacks a competing positive form.

Background NPQs are observed in many languages in East Asia, including Khmer, Thai, Mandarin, Taiwanese, Cantonese, and Hakka (Liao and Lin 2024). For Vietnamese, Trinh (2005) argues that the negative markers and question particles are homophones. Alternatives treat the question particle as negation, either (i) moved from a clause-internal position, through Neg-to-C (Le 2015, Liao & Lin 2024) or VP to Spec,NegP movement (Duffield 2013), or (ii) in a second clause that has mostly undergone ellipsis in a biclausal analysis (Trinh 2025).

Final Particle IS Negation We demonstrate that the final particle in NPQs is negation, not a homophone. First, the particle shows the allomorphy for perfectivity exhibited by negation, (3-4).

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| (3) Minh chưa/*không ăn cơm. | (4) Minh ăn cơm chưa/*không ? |
| Minh NEG.PFV/*NEG eat rice | Minh eat rice NEG.PFV/*NEG |
| To mean: “Minh hasn’t eaten.” | To mean: “Has Minh eaten?” |

Second, the final particle cannot co-occur with negation, (6), since there cannot be two negators in a declarative, (5). Negative questions must be formed with the sentence final particle (SFP) *à*, (6).

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| (5) *Nam không không chơi piano. | (6) Nam không chơi piano à/*không ? |
| Nam NEG NEG play piano | Nam NEG play piano À/*NEG |
| Int: “Nam does not not play piano.” | “Does Nam not play piano?” |

NPQs are Monoclausal We argue against a biclausal analysis: ‘[Has Minh eaten] or [has Minh not eaten]?’ *Nào* indefinites are interpreted as NPIs in the scope of negation, (7), and as “which” outside the scope of negation, but inside the scope of the question operator, (8-9). A *nào* subject of an NPQ is not in the scope of negation on a biclausal analysis, but it is on a monoclausal analysis, after Neg-to-C movement. Hence, the monoclausal analysis correctly predicts that the *nào* subject can be interpreted as an NPI in NPQs, (10).

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| (7) Linh không thích quyển sách nào. | (9) Quyển sách nào không hay? |
| Linh NEG like CL book NÀO | CL book NÀO NEG good |
| “Linh doesn’t like any books.” | “Which book isn’t good?” |
| (8) Quyển sách nào hay? | (10) Quyển sách nào hay không ? |
| CL book NÀO good | CL book NÀO good NEG |
| “Which book is good?” | “Are any books good?” |

Nor is the question particle a tag question, as they have different distributions. The tag *đúng không* ‘correct no?’ can attach to a clause containing negation or future, unlike the question particle:

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| (11) Nam không chơi piano, đúng không ? | (13) Nam sẽ chơi piano, đúng không ? |
| Nam NEG play piano, correct NEG | Nam FUT play piano, correct NEG |
| “Nam doesn’t play the piano, right?” | “Nam will play the piano, right?” |
| (12) *Nam không chơi piano không ? | (14) *Nam sẽ chơi piano không ? |
| Nam NEG play piano NEG | Nam FUT play piano NEG |
| Int: “Doesn’t Nam play the piano?” | Int: “Will Nam play the piano?” |

Neg-to-C Head Movement We claim that NPQs are derived from negated declaratives with negation surfacing in a right-headed C^0 through Neg-to-C movement (contra Duffield 2013). Our analysis yields the correct prediction that the final particle occurs after TP-level adverbials, (15), but before outer SFPs (Nguyen 2021) in the extended left periphery above CP, (16).

- (15) Nam đi chơi (ngày mai) **không** (*ngày mai)? (16) Nam đi chơi (*đấy) **không** (đấy)?
 Nam go play (tomorrow) NEG (*tomorrow) Nam go play (*SFP) NEG (SFP)
 “Will Nam go out tomorrow?” “Will Nam go out?”

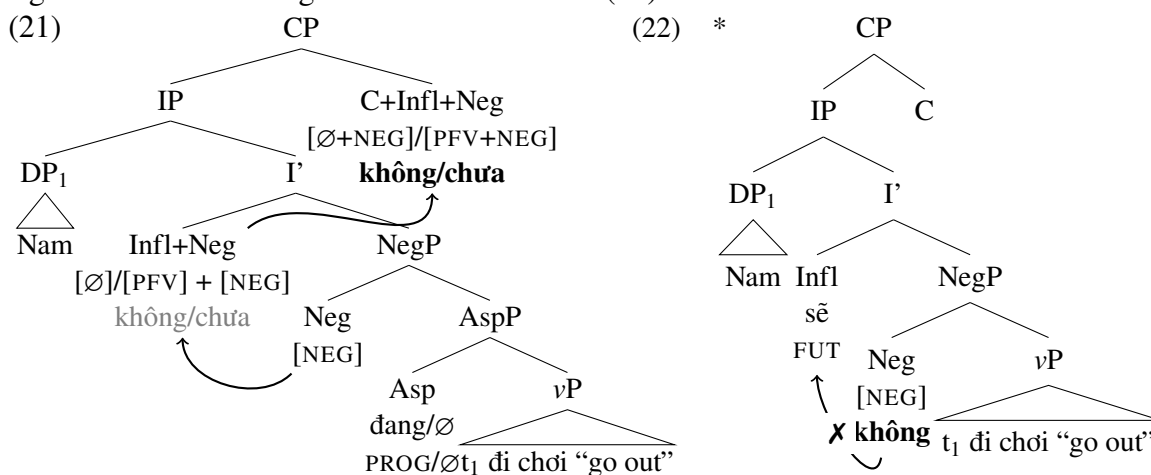
This analysis makes three correct predictions, given the Head Movement Constraint (HMC). First, the analysis predicts that the movement is blocked by overt material in Infl. This is borne out with the overt future morpheme *sẽ*, (17), even though *sẽ* can co-occur with negation in declaratives, (18).

- (17) *Nam sẽ chơi piano **không**? (18) Nam sẽ **không** chơi piano.
 Nam FUT play piano NEG Nam FUT NEG play piano
 Int: “Will Nam play piano?” “Nam will not play the piano.”

Second, [PFV] can combine with negation, as it yields the perfective negation allomorph *chưa* instead of blocking movement, as seen above in (3-4). Last, this analysis predicts that TAM markers that can appear below negation will be able to occur in NPQs; this is true of progressive *đang*, which occurs (optionally) below NegP in a declarative, (19), and so does not block movement in a question, (20).

- (19) Nam (đang) **không** ((?)đang) chơi piano (20) Nam đang chơi piano **không**?
 Nam (PROG) NEG ((?)PROG) play piano Nam PROG play piano NEG
 “Nam isn’t playing the piano.” “Is Nam playing the piano?”

The trees below show how TAMs interact with negation in NPQs. In (21), Neg-to-C movement either passes through an empty Infl, or combines with [PFV] and raises to C. A TAM in AspP below NegP does not block Neg-to-C head movement. (22) shows how an overt TAM in Infl blocks NPQs.



NPQs as Negative Questions Finally, we consider the interpretation of NPQs as neutral negative questions. The meaning of a polar question—negative or positive—is the set of its possible answers, i.e. {p,-p} (Hamblin 1973). The pragmatic effects associated with negative questions in many languages arise from the choice between the positive and the negative question. In Vietnamese, a positive competitor to NPQs does not exist, (23), as the question complementizer requires negation.

- (23) *Minh chơi piano có? (24) Minh chơi piano à?
 Minh play piano YES? Minh play piano à
 Int: “Does Minh play the piano?” “Does Minh play the piano?” (positive bias)

While Vietnamese has many interrogative SFPs, such as *à* (24), these are all pragmatically biased and so do not serve as neutral competitors for *không* in NPQs. As a result, NPQs in Vietnamese constitute an interesting case of negative questions being the default polar questions.

References

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