

# Ambiguity in the Negative V+bo NP Construction in Taiwanese Southern Min \*

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**Abstract.** This paper examines some syntactic and semantic properties of the negative construction V+bo NP (VbN) in Taiwanese Southern Min (TSM). It finds out that there are ambiguities between an episode reading and a generic reading in VbN construction which require further investigations and explanations. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to account for the ambiguities lying in the negative VbN construction.

**Keywords:** negative markers, Taiwanese Southern Min (TSM), ambiguity.

## 1. Introduction

The V+bo NP is a special negative construction in TSM whose exact syntactic counterpart is not found in Mandarin Chinese. It has been widely acknowledged that the post-verbal negative marker *bo* ‘not’ in the VbN may form a resultative complement with the preceding verb (e.g. Cheng 1997; Li 1996; Teng 1992). While those works have shed light on the semantic characteristics of *bo*, the VbN construction remains ambiguous between an episode and a generic reading that each needs to be explained. On the episode reading, *bo* expresses the lack of a desired result such as (1). Sentence (1) means that the agent *he* intended to find someone, so he did the finding-event, but failed to find out the person. On the generic reading, the VbN is taken as an association with a potential property, as in (2). It expresses that the agent *he* does not have the ability to do the studying-event well.

- (1) I chue bo lang.  
he find not person  
‘He failed in finding the person.’
- (2) I thak bo chhe.  
he study not book  
‘He can not study well.’

The main goal of this paper is to argue that the different interpretations of VbN construction in Taiwanese Southern Min may be due to different structural positions which the post-verbal negative marker *bo* occupies on the ground of Zanuttini’s (1997) proposal that argues for there to be different structural positions for two kinds of post-verbal negative markers, namely presuppositional versus non-presuppositional, as stated in (3).

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- (3) a. Presuppositional negative markers, which negate a proposition that is assumed in the discourse.  
 b. Non-presuppositional negative markers, which negate a proposition that does not have a special discourse status.

(Zanuttini 1997:

99)

More precisely, *bo* in the episode reading context corresponds to the presuppositional negative marker whereas *bo* in the generic reading context corresponds to the non-presuppositional negative marker.

The remaining sections of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 is a summary of Zanuttini's (1997) analysis of post-verbal negative markers. Section 3 shows an overview of VbN construction and provides an analysis of the distinction between an episode and a generic reading. Section 4 briefly reviews previous study on the post-verbal negative *bo*. Section 5 concludes this article.

## 2. Framework: Zanuttini's (1997) Analysis of Post-verbal Negative Markers

Zanuttini (1997) examines several Romance varieties and offers a systematic investigation of negative markers. She argues that there are two kinds of post-verbal negative markers. Based on their contributions to the meaning of the clause, post-verbal negative markers are distinguished as presuppositional negative markers when they negate a proposition that is assumed in the discourse, and as non-presuppositional negative markers when they negate a proposition that does not have a prior discourse grounding. Take (4) as an example.

- (4) a. Maria a mangia *pa/nen* la carn. (Piedmontese)  
 Maria s.cl eats neg the meat  
 'Maria doesn't eat meat.'  
 b. Gianni a capis *pa/nen* tut.  
 Gianne s.cl understands net everything  
 'Gianni doesn't understand everything.'

(Zanuttini 1997:

67)

In these examples, although there is no apparent difference between the use of *pa* and *nen*, they indeed contribute different interpretations to the sentences. *Pa* is taken as a presuppositional negative marker since it negates a proposition assumed in the discourse, whereas *nen* as a non-propositional negative marker since it does not.

Her syntactic analysis of post-verbal negative markers is essentially based on two findings of Cinque's work<sup>1</sup>. First, the relative ordering of adverbs in the clause is fixed in the structure. Second, for each adverb, there is one head position to its immediate right and one head position to its immediate left.

Regarding the adverbs she mainly considers the ones which occur in lower positions (compared with those appear in a higher portion in the clausal structure) such as 'already', 'no more' and 'always' since they are the crucial ones which help determine the distribution of post-verbal negative markers.

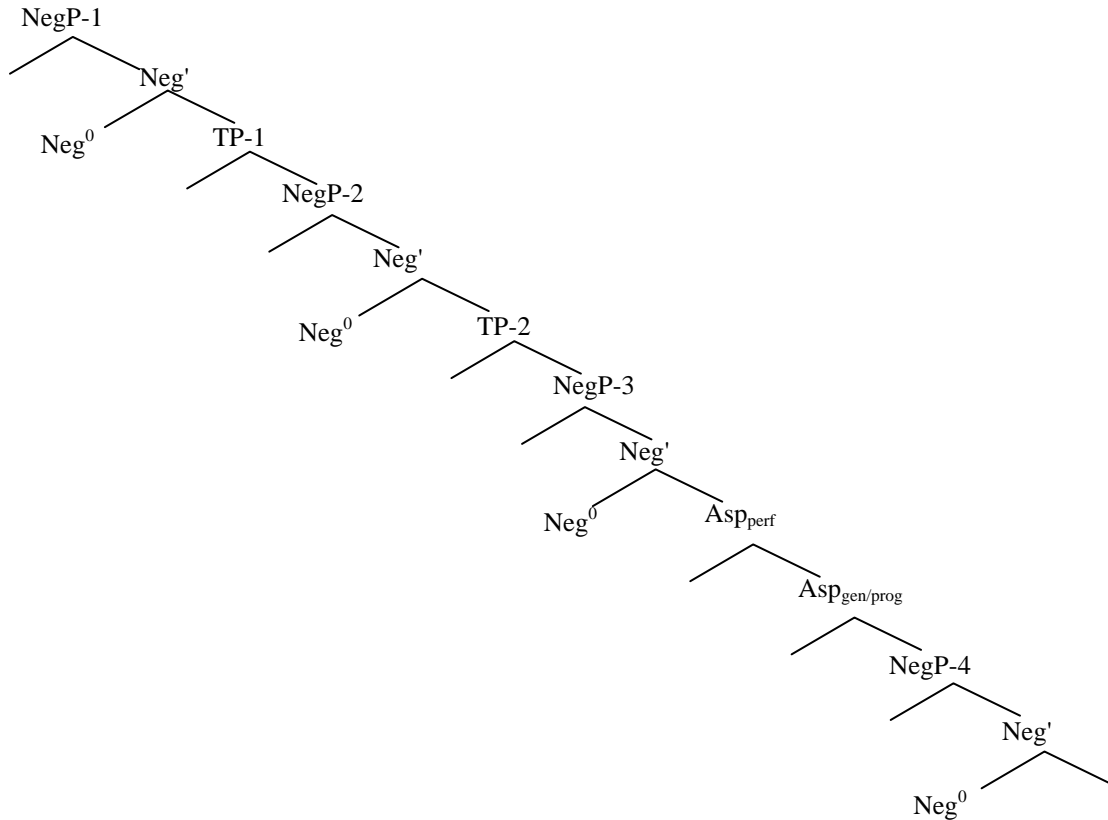
She further proposes that the negative marker occurs in the specifier of a projection labeled NegP<sup>2</sup>. Assuming this, the NegP-1 is labelled for the projection headed by the pre-verbal negative marker and the NegPs such as NegP-2, NegP-3, NegP-4 are required for the projections headed by post-verbal negative markers. The relative order of post-verbal negative

<sup>1</sup> For more details, readers are referred to Zanuttini (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Readers for more references are referred to Rizzi (1990), Zanuttini (1997) among others.

markers is determined by virtue of their interaction with the relevant adverbs which occur in lower positions. Apart from these three different structural positions for post-verbal negatives, she implies more NegP projections for post-verbal negative markers are not impossible. The relevant syntactic structure is represented in (5) below.

(5)



(adopted from Zanuttini 1997: 101)

According to her, NegP-2 is the position for negative markers with a presuppositional reading because of the following reason:

...it is crucial for this type of negative markers to occur above TP-2, the projection that hosts in its specifier and adverbs corresponding to English 'already'. Note that these adverbs also have a presuppositional reading: 'already' presupposes the event and asserts that it has taken place before a certain moment in time. It is tempting to think that it is not a coincidence that both presuppositional negative markers and these adverbs occur in the same portion of clausal structure.

(Zanuttini 1997:100-01)

NegP-3 and NegP-4 are the positions for negative markers with a non-presuppositional reading. This paper will ignore characterization of NegP-3 and NegP-4 since they do not appear to contribute different interpretations to the clause, and hence are irrelevant to clarification of the ambiguities in VbN construction. Instead, attention will be drawn to the distinction between NegP-2 and NegP-4 later in this paper as the former appears to parallel an episode reading while the latter to parallel a generic reading.

### 3. Overview and Analysis for Taiwanese VbN Construction

#### 3.1. General properties

##### 3.1.1. Syntactic distribution

As noted by Huang (2003), *bo* forms a compound with the preceding verb rather than with the following noun phrase regardless of an episode or a generic reading. Hence, *bo*+NP can not be taken as a negative NP, as illustrated in (6-8).

- (6) a. I thak bo chhe.  
he study not book  
'He can't study well.'  
b. I chhe thak bo.
- (7) a. Abi chhue bo lang.  
Abi find not person  
'Abi failed in finding the person.'  
b. Abi lang chhue bo.
- (8) a. I than bo chiN, ma chhua bo bo.  
he earn not money also marry not wife  
'He failed in making money and also failed in getting a wife.'  
b. I chiN than bo, bo ma chhua bo.  
he money earn not wife also marry not

Moreover, the degree adverb *ka* 'more' is compatible with the VbN construction and as it co-occurs with VbN, this construction will denote a generic reading irrespective of the fact whether it originally has an episode or a generic reading. To express this, examples in (9-10) show its original use with an episode reading while examples in (11-12) with a generic reading.

- (9) a. In man bo kam-a.  
they pick not tangerine-Suffix  
'They failed in picking tangerines.'  
b. In *kha* man bo kam-a.  
'They are less able to pick tangerines (, comparing with others).'
- (10) a. In lia bo hi-a.  
they catch not fish-Suffix  
'They failed in catching fish.'  
b. In *kha* lia bo hi-a.  
'They are less able to catch fish (, comparing with others).'
- (11) a. I thak bo chhe.  
he study not book  
'He can't study well.'  
b. I *kha* thak bo chhe.  
'He is less able to study well (,comparing with others).'
- (12) a. Chit-chia ti chiN bo yu.  
this-CL pig fry not oil  
'There is no oil of this pig to be fried.'  
b. Chit-chia ti *kha* chiN bo yu.  
'There is less oil of this pig to be fried.'

We have looked at the distribution of VbN construction and now we will turn to examine its semantic contribution to the clause.

### 3.1.2.Semantic properties

Huang (2003) found out a semantic property for VbN construction in which *bo*+NPs only occur with accomplishment verbs, or activity verbs which are turned into accomplishments by adding *bo*+NP. That is, *bo*+NP cannot co-occur with stative verbs which cannot be changed into a telic event, as shown in (13).

- (13) a. \*I ai bo lang.  
he love not person  
'He failed in loving anyone.'  
b.\* I sioN bo lang.  
he think not person  
'He failed in thinking of anyone.'

Furthermore, Cheng (1997) observes more restrictions on verbs in VbN construction. Verbs which denote 'disposing' meaning such as *be* 'sell', *chhat* 'erase', and *tan* 'throw' are not compatible with VbN like (14) unless what follows them is concerned with quantity or quality like (15).

- (14) a.\* Abing be bo saN.  
Abing sell not clothes  
'Abing failed in selling any clothes.'  
b.\* Abing chhat bo O-pang.  
Abing erase not blackboard  
'Abing failed in cleaning blackboards.'  
(15) a. Abing be bo chap-niaN saN.  
Abing sell not ten-CL clothes  
'Abing failed in selling ten suits of clothes.'  
b. Abing chhat bo leng-te O-pang.  
Abing erase not two-CL blackboard  
'Abing failed in cleaning two blackboards.'

The final set of examples demonstrate that the VbN construction with an episode reading has a parallel interpretation of Mandarin *mei V-dao N*, where *-dao* serves as a phase marker based on Chao (1968). This is exemplified in (16-17).

- (16) a. I lim bo chui. (TSM)  
he drink not water  
'He failed in drinking water.'  
b. Ta mei he-dao shui. (Mandarin)  
he not drink-PHASE water  
(17) a. I ti hia tan bo lang. (TSM)  
he at there wait not person  
'He failed in waiting for the person there.'  
b. Ta zai na-li mei deng-dao ren. (Mandarin)  
he at there not wait-PHASE person

Contrarily, on the generic reading the VbN construction does not allow the parallel interpretation of Mandarin *mei V-PHASE N*, as illustrated in (18b,19b). Rather, they have a correspondent interpretation of Mandarin *V bu-PHASE N*, as shown in (18c, 19c).

- (18) a. I tso bo tai-tsi. (TSM)  
he do not thing

- ‘He can do nothing well.’
- \*b. Ta mei zuo-hao shi-qing. (Mandarin)  
 he not do-PHASE thing
- c. Ta zuo bu-hao ren-he shi-qing.  
 not-PHASE any thing
- (19) a. Tsit-khu tshan tsing bo mi-kiaN. (TSM)  
 this-CL farm grow not thing  
 ‘This farm can’t grow anything.’
- \*b. Zhe-kuai tian-di mei zhong-chu dong-xi. (Mandarin)  
 this-CL farm not grow-PHASE thing
- c. Zhe-kuai tian-di zhong bu-chu dong-xi.  
 not-PHASE

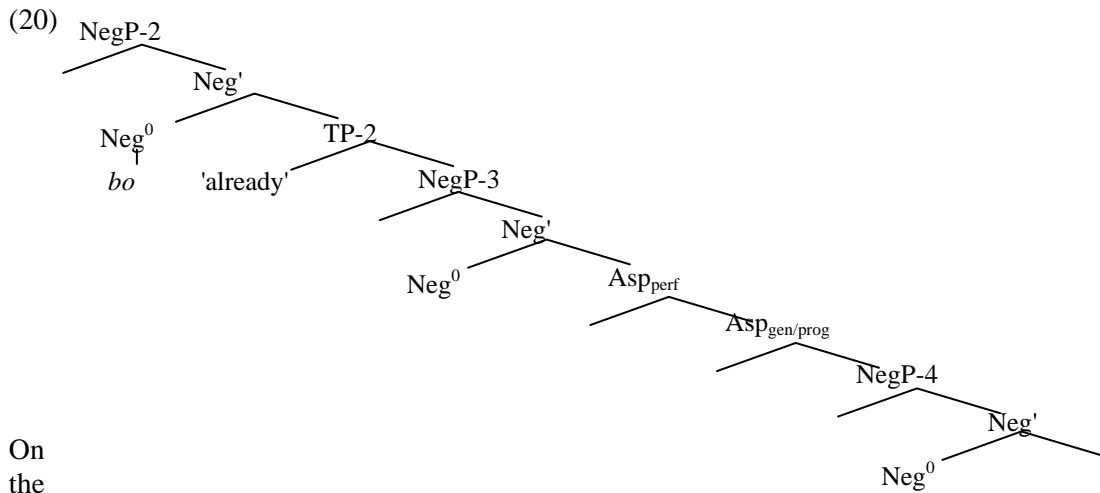
Both *bu* ‘not’ and *mei* ‘not’ are negative markers used in Mandarin Chinese. Lin (2003) has proposed that *mei* aspectually selects an event as its complement while *bu* aspectually selects as its complement a stative situation that requires no input of energy. Therefore, the comparison between Mandarin and Southern Min negative markers shown above suggests an interesting point that *bo* ‘not’ in VbN construction has overlapping aspectual properties of *mei* and *bu*.

### 3.2. The analysis of the distinction between an episode and a generic reading

As we have seen above, there is no apparent syntactic distinction between an episode and a generic reading in VbN construction. They are different only in semantic interpretation when compared with their counterparts in Mandarin. Under certain circumstances such as cooccurrence of the degree adverb *kha* ‘more’, the episode reading can be further turned into a generic reading as in (9-10).

Based on the above investigations, I argue that the ambiguity between an episode and a generic reading are due to different heads of NegPs which the negative marker *bo* occupies. To put it more precisely, when *bo* occupies head of NegP-2 it yields an episode reading; when *bo* occupies head of NegP-4 it yields a generic reading. Henceforth I take *bo* with an episode meaning as corresponding to the presuppositional negative marker and *bo* with a generic meaning as corresponding to the non-presuppositional negative marker.

As noted by Zanuttini (1997), TP-2 is the projection which hosts adverbs in its specifier that correspond to English ‘already’; therefore, TP-2 presupposes the event and testifies that it has happened before a certain moment of time. As a result of this fact, the negative marker *bo* which occupies head of NegP-2 has the potential for contribution of a telic event, and that makes clauses containing such kind of VbN construction comply with an episode reading. The relevant structure is shown in (20) below.



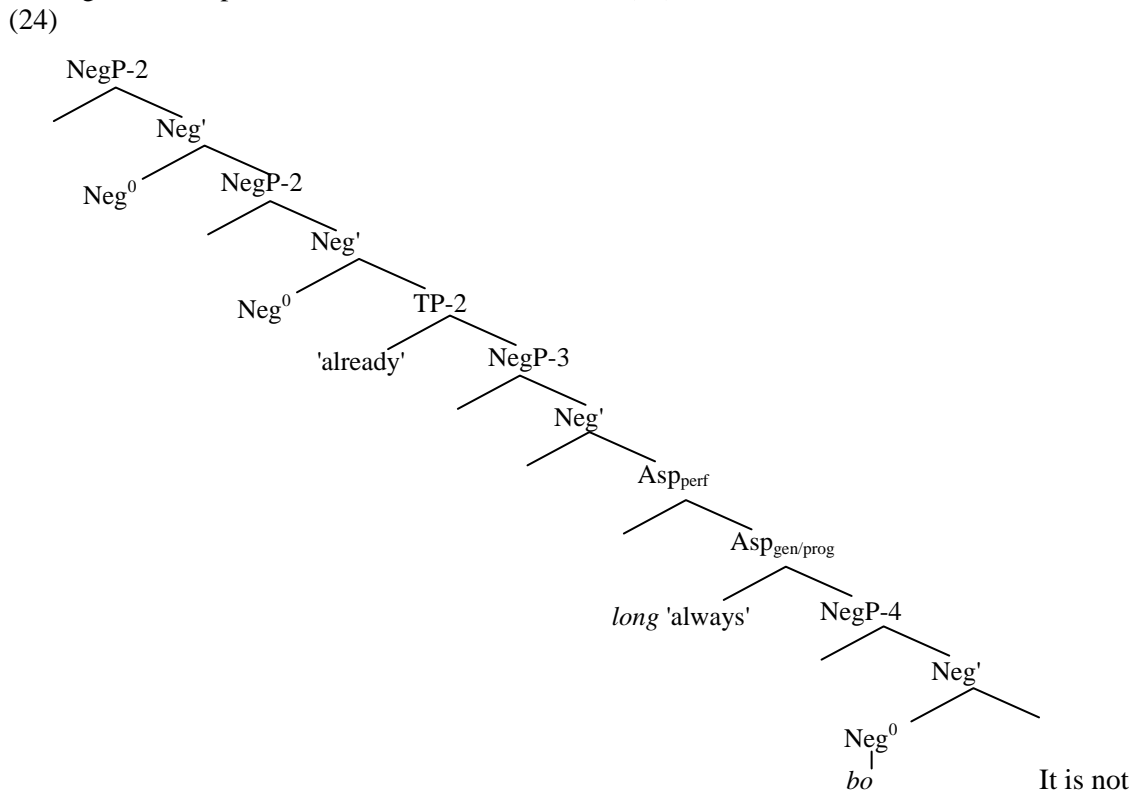
other hand, when *bo* occupies head of NegP-4, the VbN is associated with a generic reading, as shown in (21).

- (21) I thiaN bo enggi.  
 he hear not English  
 'He can't understand English.'

Supporting evidence comes from the interaction between *bo* and the adverb *long* 'always'. (22a) and (23a) are originally with episode readings and (22b) and (23b) are those turned into generic readings.

- (22) a. I khi chhai-chi-a be bo saN.  
 she go market buy not clothes  
 'She failed in buying any clothes in the market.'  
 b. I khi chhai-chi-a *long* be bo saN.  
 'It's always been the case that she failed in buying any clothes in the market.'
- (23) a. I chha bo Abing-e chu-chi.  
 he seek not Abing's address  
 'He failed in seeking out Abing's address.'  
 b. I *long* chha bo Abing-e chu-chi.  
 'It's always been the case that he failed in seeking out Abing's address.'

An adverb like 'always' occurs in the specifier of the projection which Zanuttini (1997) has labeled  $Asp_{gen/prog}$ , a position lower than TP-2. As shown in (22b) and (23b), *long* 'always' appears to c-command *bo* 'not' so that *long* is structurally higher than *bo*. According to the interpretations, the negation marker *bo* cannot take scope over such adverb. Consequently, *bo* is assumed to occupy a position lower than *long*, namely NegP-4, and yields the clause a generic reading. This is represented in the relevant structure (24) below.



uncommon, as observed by Zanuttini (1997), that the element which is typically used as a presuppositional negative marker can occur in a lower position than ‘already’. As this happens, the presuppositional negative marker will contribute a non-presuppositional reading. This may be the reason why an episode reading of *bo* can be turned into a generic usage such as (9-10b, 22-23b) above.

#### 4. Previous Related Study

##### 4.1. Cheng (1997), Li (1996), Teng (1992)’s observations

Cheng (1997), Li (1996) and Teng (1992) claim that *bo* in VbN construction serves as a resultative complement of the preceding verb although they do not give analyses of it. Cheng notices that the V+*bo* or V+*u* construction<sup>3</sup> is ambiguous between potential modality as in (25) and existential aspect as in (26)<sup>4</sup>.

(25) a. Q: Chit-chun khi kam be u mih?  
           now go kam buy u thing  
           ‘Can you get anything at this hour?’

b. A: U, be u.  
       U buy u  
       ‘Yes, I can.’

(Cheng 1997: 215)

(26) a. Chheh goa cha-hng be bo.  
       book I yesterday buy not  
       ‘I failed to get the book yesterday.’

(Cheng 1997: 212)

Teng takes *bo* as a resultative complement in the following examples (27-29) and calls for a fine analysis of its syntactic characteristics.

(27) Chit-pun chhe hia-ni chhen, li na-e khoaN bo?  
       this-CL book that easy you how come read not  
       ‘This is an easy book; how come you don’t understand it?’

(28) I hit-khoan lang chuat-tui chhoa bo sim-pu.  
       he that-kind person absolutely marry not daughter-in-law  
       ‘Nobody could stand being a daughter-in-law to a man like that.’

(29) I-e tian-oe, goa long mng bo.  
       his telephone I always ask not  
       ‘Nobody could tell me what his telephone number is.’

(Teng 1992: 628)

##### 4.2. Huang’s (2003) position on ‘bo’

Huang (2003) takes *bo* as forming a resultative compound with the preceding verb instead of forming a negative NP with the following bare noun. Taking this position on *bo*, he implies that *bo* has combined with its preceding verb to form a lexicon verb so that *bo* would not be able to undergo syntactic or semantic operations. However, not only does he give analysis of *bo* but as the previous discussions demonstrate, *bo* should not be taken as a compound with its preceding verb since it has flexibility to occur in different structural positions.

<sup>3</sup> . V+*u* is taken as the assertive form of V+*bo* by Cheng.

<sup>4</sup> . In such case, his potential modality corresponds to the generic reading and existential aspect to the episode reading.



### 4.3. Tang's (1996) analysis

Tang (1996) provides an analysis of *bo* by means of lexicalization. He proposes that *m* 'not' is the only 'simple negation' in Taiwanese Southern Min and that the other negation markers are simply derived from *m* plus other verbs through fusion. Therefore, under his analysis *bo* is composed of *m* and *u* through fusion, where *u* still exists in the underlying form but does not appear in the phonetic form. With this in mind, he claims that we do not need to consider the cooccurrence restriction between *bo* and other syntactic elements; instead, we can predict the syntactic distribution of *bo* simply by investigating its composed element *u*. However, counterexamples arise as in (30-34).

- (30) a. \*Chit-le wa-tang lai u chap-e lang.  
this-CL activity come *u* ten-CL person  
'There came ten people to this activity.'  
b. Chit-le wa-tang lai bo chap-e lang.  
not  
'There came less than ten people to this activity.'
- (31) a. \*I chao u lo a.  
he run *u* way SFP  
'He had ways to go.'  
b. I chao bo lo a.  
not  
'He had no way to go.'
- (32) a. \*Aphang tan u Abing.  
Aphang wait *u* Abing  
'Aphang succeeded in waiting for Abing.'  
b. Aphang tan bo Abing.  
not  
'Aphang failed in waiting for Abing.'
- (33) a. \*Gua chham i kong u we.  
I and he talk *u* word  
'He and I can talk much with each other.'  
b. Gua chham i kong bo we.  
not  
'He and I have nothing to talk to each other.'
- (34) a. \*I thiaN u li kong e we.  
he hear *u* you say Gen. word  
'He can understand what you say.'  
b. I thiaN bo li kong e we.  
not  
'He can't understand what you say.'

According to these data, the sentences with negative V *bo*+NP construction are syntactically grammatical and to claim that *u* determines the distribution of *bo* would wrongly predict that they are ungrammatical.

### 5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that the ambiguity of the negative VbN construction in TSM lies within different structural positions which *bo* occupies on the ground of Zanuttini's (1997) analysis of post-verbal negatives. I also examine the diverse syntactic and semantic properties of VbN as well as its interactions with other elements. Apart from the investigation of VbN, I show that some previous study does not give any explanation for the ambiguity which is raised in this

paper, and that Huang's (2003) position of *bo* will encounter problems which however might have an explanation from my position. Furthermore, I show that Tang's (1996) analysis of *bo* will fail to explain the counterexamples that I raised. Despite of those advantages, this paper has not provided a full syntactic nor semantic account of how *bo* in TSM comes to NegP-2 and NegP-4 positions. Therefore, further refinement of solutions will be required and we will keep pursuing the negation properties in VbN construction.

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