Formation of the Old Chinese Negative 弗 *put in the Light of the Shang Dynasty Oracle Bone Inscriptions

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Abstract

Old Chinese possessed a complex system of negation, the exact nature of which has been under academic discussion for a long time. This study deals with the formative history of the Old Chinese negative adverb 弗 *put, using oracle bone inscriptions as the source material. It is argued that these inscriptions provide the most reliable view into the early history of the negative system in Old Chinese and should consequently be preferred over transmitted texts that have often been taken as a starting point by many scholars. Furthermore, it is argued that the oracle bone inscriptions provide significant corroborative evidence for the formation of 弗 *put as a contraction of the negative 不 *pə and the pronoun 之 *tə. The view suggested in this paper also explains why the negative 弗 *put evolved into a negative of highly transitive verbs, leading into the development of a system of negation that is encountered rather infrequently cross-linguistically.

1. Introduction

It has long been known that Old Chinese[1] possessed a complex system of negatives. However, in spite of considerable amount of academic research by both Eastern and Western scholars about the subject, some peculiarities of Old Chinese negation have remained controversial to this day. One of such issues is the functional domains of the indicative negatives 弗 *put[2] and 不 *pə, together with their formative history. At the core of discourse has been the claim that the negative 弗 originates from a contraction or fusion of the negative 不 and the pronoun 之 *tə[3]. This claim has nevertheless been frequently questioned and several alternative solutions to the formative problem have been proposed.

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[1] "Old Chinese" is a broad term that usually refers to the stages of the Chinese language from the Shang dynasty until approximately the beginning of the Han dynasty. Sometimes the Shang dynasty is excluded from the definition. However, the term is used in the broad meaning in this paper, thus including the Shang Chinese language.

[2] The reconstructed forms in this paper are adopted from Baxter and Sagart (n.d.).

[3] Originally, this pronoun probably had a demonstrative function, later evolving into a third person personal pronoun.

This brief paper approaches the problem of the formation of the negative 弗 from the viewpoint of the oracle bone inscriptions (henceforth OBIs, OBI in the singular). Despite their various limitations, these inscriptions constitute the first written source of a Sinitic language, and should consequently play a central role in academic discussion about the history of the Chinese language.[4] Based on the analysis of OBIs from the Chinese Ancient Texts Database (CHANT) created and maintained by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, it is shown that the contraction theory about the origin of 弗 is likely to be correct. In other words, written sources from the Shang dynasty are shown to provide evidence about the formative history of the negative 弗, solidifying the claims of the negative's origin as a contraction or fusion of two elements.

2. The negative 弗 in the negative system of Shang Chinese

Before dealing with the negative 弗, it is important to situate it in the framework of Shang Chinese negatives. As shown in Table 1. below, there were at least six distinct negatives in Shang Chinese.[5] In terms of their initials, they fall into two categories: the *p-series of 弗 *put, 不 *pə, 非 *pəj and the *m-series of 亡 *maŋ, 勿 (allograph 弜) *mut and 毋 *mo. At the same time, in terms of modality, the negatives can be divided into two groups, namely indicative and non-indicative negatives. It is worth noting that the phonological and modal group divisions do not overlap completely, since he *m-series negative 亡 *maŋ belongs to the category of indicative negation.

Table 1. Summary of the Shang Chinese negatives

Indicative negation		Non-indicative negation[6]	
丗	弗 *put	彡 , 彡彡	勿, 弜 *mut
疒	不 *pə	勿	毋 *mo
𥎊	非 *pəj		
𠄌	亡 *maŋ		

Interestingly, the distribution of the indicative negatives in Shang Chinese seems to be related to the concept of transitivity. This may be typologically rare, but there indeed exist other languages in which the functional range of the negatives is determined by the transitivity value of the negated verb. For example, Hurrian, a defunct language spoken in ancient Mesopotamia, used different

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[4] Some bronze inscriptions engraved using the so-called bronze script date back to the Shang dynasty and can be thus said to be approximately as old as the OBIs (Ōnishi 2009: 53). However, since these bronze inscriptions are short in length and relatively few in number, they are excluded from the scope of this study.

[5] The oracle bone characters of the negatives are listed on the left columns. Also, it should be noted that it is perfectly possible that other negatives existed, but they failed to leave any evidence of themselves in the oracular records. As always, historical records of a dead language give us only a partial picture of the language's real form at the time it was spoken.

[6] The term "modal negation" could also be used, but since strictly speaking, indicative is also a mood, the term "non-indicatice negation" is adopted here. For further inquiries about the modal nature of the non-indicative negatives, refer to Djamouri (2001) and Takashima (1973).

negative morphemes for transitive and intransitive verbs in indicative negation while nominal negation took the form of yet another morpheme. This phenomenon strikingly resembles the structure of indicative negation in Shang Chinese. The negative verb 亡 negates nominal constituents whereas the negatives 弗 and 不 contrast in verbal negation with transitivity being a central parameter in determining their distribution. Verbs negated with 不 express locomotion, state, change of state, weather phenomena or have undergone a valency-decreasing operation. The common factor for such verbs lies in their low level of transitivity and lack of a saliently affected object. In contrast to this, the verbs that display the characteristics of high level transitivity with an affected object are negated with 弗. The examples (1) and (2) below elucidate this contrast.

(1)   乙   亥   不   風

yi-day   hai-day   NEG   to blow (wind), to be windy

On the yi-hai-day, it will not be windy. (H10020)[7]

(2)   王   羌   弗   戕   朕   史

king   Qiang   NEG   to slay   my   ambassador

The king (said): "The Qiang tribe will not slay my ambassadors." (H06599)

If transitivity does indeed constitute an important factor in determining the functional domains of the negatives 弗 and 不, the origins of such a typologically infrequent phenomenon must be addressed. It is argued that the OBIs provide a key in explaining the origins of the distribution. However, before moving into the evidence, the reasons why the OBIs should be preferred over the so-called transmitted texts are briefly given in the following chapter.

3.   Old Chinese negation and the problem of source materials

Broadly speaking, there exist two main types of textual sources about the Old Chinese language, namely excavated texts and transmitted texts. Both of these have been used as sources in Old Chinese negation studies, for example, in attempts to establish the functional domains of the negatives 弗 and 不. In this chapter, it is argued that among the source materials, the excavated sources provide a more reliable account about the history of negation in Chinese. In other words, due to historical circumstances, in many cases, the distribution of negation in the transmitted texts does not reflect the historical linguistic reality.

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[7] The original sources of the example sentences are indicated by letters in this paper. "H" refers to *Jiaguwen heji* (甲骨文合集), the standard Chinese OBI corpus, and "D" to *Tōkyō daigaku tōyō bunka kenkyūshozō kōkotsu moji* (東京大学東洋文化研究所藏甲骨文字) by the University of Tokyo.

The OBIs excavated directly from the ground constitute a primary source of obtaining linguistic evidence from Old Chinese. Consequently, these long-forgotten texts faithfully reflect the orthography and writing conventions of the Shang dynasty at the time, without having undergone centuries of transmutations by several generations of scribes. However, unfortunately the same cannot be said about later texts that have survived to our days as a result of manuscript copying. Boltz (2007: 459-460) points out that in the Western tradition of textual criticism, change in textual transmission has been considered a corruptive or degenerative factor, but such an attitude is absent from the corresponding Chinese textual tradition. Consequently, considerable change has mutated many of the transmitted texts over history. If the change limits itself to a mere replacement of some content words with others, our picture of Old Chinese grammar remains undistorted. However, it seems probable that the character replacement process took place also with the negatives, thus leading into a situation, in which many inexplicable inconsistencies have arisen. Boltz (2007: 467) provides a good summary of some of the consequences and limitations that textual mutation imposes on the study of negation.

"The confusion between the negatives 弗 (*pət) and 不 (*pə) in transmitted texts is widely recognized as a consequence of the fact that the former was a part of the personal name Fuling 弗陵 of Emperor Zhao of the Western Han (r. 86–74 B.C.) and was therefore avoided out of respect in texts written after his death. The customary practice was to replace the character 弗 with 不, a substitution that presented no interpretive problem at all. [...] Later, when scholars and editors no longer felt any need to observe the "taboo" on Emperor Zhao's name and wanted to restore the original 弗 characters to their "rightful" places in the texts, the earlier grammatical rule about the position of direct object pronouns had become obsolete and the proper explanation of 弗 as a fusion of *bu* < *pə 不 plus *zhi* < *tə 之 was no longer clearly understood. As a consequence 弗 was "restored" in places where it never existed in the first place and was not restored in places where it should have been, leaving 不 instead. The outcome is that in transmitted pre-Han and early Han texts the distribution of 弗 and 不 relative to each other is unsystematic and inexplicable from a grammatical perspective."

In addition to confusion about the negatives 弗 and 不, the modal negative 毋 eventually merged phonologically with the negative 無 of Classical Chinese, leading into etymologically mistaken spellings in many instances. Consequently, conducting diachronic analysis on the history of the structure of negation in Chinese based on the transmitted and therefore likely mutated texts has serious undeniable limits. Overreliance on these texts has likely caused many researchers reach untenable conclusions. Hence, this study has avoided these texts as an aid in understanding the formative history of the negative 弗 in favor of the OBIs. A careful analysis of these inscriptions provides the most reliable starting point for understanding the history of the Chinese language.

4. Constituent order and the negative 弗

This chapter approaches the problem of the origin of 弗 from the viewpoint of Shang Chinese grammar. It is argued that the old theory about the negative adverb 弗 as a contraction or fusion of the negative 不 and the pronoun 之 may not be as implausible as some scholars have claimed.[8] A comparison of constituent orders in the OBIs provides corroborative evidence for the theory, providing the starting point for further inquiry about the history of the negative 弗.

The main constituent order of Old Chinese was SVO beyond any reason of doubt. However, a constituent order inversion into the SOV-type took place in negative sentences with pronominal objects. Simply put, when a pronoun appeared as an object of a negative clause, the constituent order of the clause underwent a change from SVO into SOV.[9] An example of the phenomenon is provided below. The sentence (3) takes the affirmative form and consequently follows the basic SVO order. In example (4), which is the antithetic pair[10] of the previous sentence, the appearance of the negative 不 triggers a change in constituent order, leading into asymmetric negation[11]. This syntactic change is obligatory and instances, such as example (5) are considered ungrammatical.

(3)　　　祖　　　辛　　　丑　　　我
　　　　ancestor　　Xin　　to harm　　we-OBJ

Ancestor Xin will harm us. (H00095)

(4)　　　祖　　　辛　　　不　　　我　　　丑
　　　　ancestor　　Xin　　NEG　　we-OBJ　　to harm

Ancestor Xin will not harm us. (H00095)

(5)　　*祖　　　辛　　　不　　　丑　　　我
　　　ancestor　　Xin　　NEG　　to harm　　we-OBJ

Ancestor Xin will not harm us. (No actual appearance in the corpus.)

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[8] For example, as an alternative approach, Aldridge (2009) argues against the contraction theory by proposing that the negative 弗 arose through encliticization or suffixation of an Old Chinese causative affix to the negative 不.

[9] As shown by Kryukov (1980: 67), this phenomenon is not restricted only to direct objects, but includes also indirect pronominal objects of verbs.

[10] The term "antithetic pair" (对贞) refers to a set of positive and negative sentences on the same plastron or scapula used in oracle bone divination. The content of the sentences is basically identical, except that one of them is in the affirmative and the other in the negative form.

[11] Miestamo (2005: 51): "When there are structural differences, i.e. asymmetry, between the affirmative and the negative in addition to the negative markers(s), the structures are asymmetric."

Importantly, in analyzing indicative negation, the constituent order changes only with the negative 不. Seen slightly differently, the negative 弗 does not appear in sentences with negated pronominal objects, regardless of the transitivity value of the negated verb. The aforementioned facts are illustrated in examples (6) and (7) below. In terms of actual frequencies, the sequences 不余 (NEG I-OBJ) and 不我 (NEG we-OBJ) occur 8 and 85 times respectively in the OBIs of the CHANT database whereas no instances of the sequences 弗余 (NEG I-OBJ) and 弗我 (NEG we-OBJ) can be found. This distributional bias is significant and must be thought to bear meaning, since based on the rules of Shang Chinese negation introduced in chapter 2, one would expect the negative 弗 to appear even in sentences with pronominal objects provided that the object is saliently affected and thus exhibits strong level of transitivity. In the following chapter, a historical analysis into the formation of the negative 弗 attempts to show the underlying reasons for this behavior of negated sentences with pronominal objects in the OBIs.

(6)   呂   才   爾   我   戔

     舌   方   不   我   戋

     Gong   tribe   NEG   we-OBJ   to destroy

     Gong tribe will not destroy us. (D00113)

(7)   *呂   才   弗   我   戔

     *舌   方   弗   我   戋

     Gong   tribe   NEG   we-OBJ   to destroy

     Gong tribe will not destroy us. (No actual appearance in the corpus.)

5. Formation of the negative 弗

The previous chapter showed that the negative 弗 is totally absent when the negated verb bears a pronominal object, even though it should appear in many instances as the negative of highly transitive sentences. In this chapter, a historical solution connecting this distributional fact to the contraction theory about the emergence of 弗 is proposed.

In the proto-Sino-Tibetan language, an *m-initial negative is reconstructed from frequent appearances in the daughter languages, but no *p-initial negative seems to have existed in the proto-language.[12] Therefore, in terms of internal history of the Sino-Tibetan language family, the negatives beginning with the initial *p, namely 弗, 不 and 非[13] seem to be later innovations of

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[12] Thurgood and Polla (eds.) (2003: 27) give the preverbal particle *ma- as the only form of negative that can be traced back to proto-Sino-Tibetan.

[13] As explained in Pulleyblank (1995: 106), the standard theory considers the negative particle 非 of Classical Chinese a contraction of the negative 不 *pə and the pre-classical copula 隹 *ɢʷij (Classical Chinese written forms 維, 惟 and 唯). The distribution of this negative in the OBIs testifies for the standard theory. However, during the

the Sinitic branch. Theoretically, two plausible origins may be proposed for the *p-initial negatives. These negatives may have formed through intra-linguistic factors or they may have been borrowed into the language from a surrounding language. At the current stage of scholarship, no final answer can be given to the question of the origin of *p-series negatives. However, this does not impede us from tracing the history of 弗 with fair certainty; if it is supposed that the forms 不 and 弗 are not equally old, as the contracting theory about the origin of the negative 弗 implies, 弗 can be explained as deriving from the negative 不, the probable ultimate ancestor of all *p-series negatives. Furthermore, with the aforementioned supposition, anomalous distribution of the negatives in sentences with pronominal objects in the OBIs can be explained together with the reasons why 弗 evolved into the negation of transitive verbs.

It is a fairly common linguistic phenomenon that certain structures retain older features of a language while grammatical change takes place. Here it is proposed that in pre-Shang Chinese, a new *p-initial negative evolved either through language-internal factors or through borrowing from a neighboring language, thus enriching the existing negative system. This negative can be said to have been the proto-form of the negative 不 and it undertook the function of verbal negation regardless of the transitivity value of the verbs negated. In sum, in pre-Shang Chinese, there existed a stage when the negative 弗 did not yet exist and the functional range of 不 covered that of both 弗 and 不 of latter stages of the language.

Some sentences negated with 不 carried pronominal objects, thus causing the negative directly precede the object pronoun. It is plausible that the pronoun 之 *tə appeared frequently together with the negative, 不 *pə, thus leading into their new contracted or fusional form *put, later written with its own character 弗.[14] Also from a phonological viewpoint, this seems highly plausible, since the deletion of the final vowel constitutes the greatest change leading into the new shape.

The OBIs fully support the aforementioned approach. The reason why the negative 弗 could not co-occur with other pronouns lies in the fact that historically speaking, it already includes the pronoun 之. Ergo, non-attested forms, such as *弗我 appearing in example (7), would be historically traceable into semantic nonsense with two consecutive pronominal objects, such as *不之我. It follows that the pronouns of Shang Chinese can only be negated with 不, retaining the structure of negation prior to the emergence of 弗. To sum up, of all theories concerning the emergence of the negative 弗, the contraction approach works best since it neatly explains the peculiar distributional behavior of Shang Chinese negatives in sentences with pronominal objects.

In addition, it is also necessary to trace how the negative 弗 evolved into a specialized negative of transitive verbs. A sentence that had a pronoun as the object would by definition have been a

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phase of Shang Chinese, the negative seems to have been in its incipient stage, with less than 1% of occurrences among the total of all negatives in the extant OBIs. Because of its irrelevance to the main arguments of this paper, it is not dealt with here.

[14] The combination 不之 has no clear instances in the OBIs. Thus, the fusion must have largely taken place before the Shang started writing down their language.

transitive sentence. In other words, if the negative 弗 indeed originates from the contraction of 不之, it would have invariably appeared only in transitive sentences. It is logical to suppose that since 弗 appeared in transitive sentences, a connection between it and transitivity was established in the minds of speakers. Therefore, as the language evolved, the final *-t of the negative was reanalyzed as a marker of a following transitive verb, in contrast to the negative 不 with no final consonant. Gradually, a distinction between 弗 and 不 must have taken place, ultimately leading to the somewhat peculiar system of negation that is visible in the extant OBIs.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the formative history of the Old Chinese negative 弗 from the viewpoint of OBI materials from the Shang dynasty. As a basic approach in terms of utilized source materials, it was argued that OBIs should be preferred over transmitted texts since textual transmission has mutated many of the texts, thus making analysis of Old Chinese negation on the basis of these texts a rather complicated and even futile task. Also, it was shown how the sentences with pronominal objects provide further evidence for the emergence of the negative adverb 弗 as a contraction of the older negative 不 and the pronoun 之. Finally, a possible evolutionary path for 弗 into a transitive verbs was proposed.

Abbreviations

f	front of an oracle bone inscription
NEG	negative
OBI	oracle bone inscription (plural: OBIs)
OBJ	object

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上古漢語における否定詞「弗」の成立をめぐって

—殷代の甲骨文字資料に基づくアプローチ—

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キーワード： 殷代中国語、甲骨文字、否定、他動性

要旨

　上古漢語は比較的に複雑な否定体系を有した。本研究では、殷代の甲骨文資料のコーパスに基づき、否定副詞「弗」*put の成立について考察を行う。代名詞目的語否定文の分析により、否定詞「弗」は否定詞「不」*pə 及び代名詞「之」*tə の融合によって生まれたという長年論争されてきた仮説が正しいと出張する。

（ホンカサロ・サミ）