This paper proposes an analysis of Mandarin Chinese negation in which bu ‘not’ is an adverb in Spec,AuxP or Spec,VP which may occur only with unbounded aspectual situations and which must cliticize to the following element at S-structure. Evidence comes primarily from the facts that (1) bu does not normally occur with perfective aspect markers or with telic situations (such as achievements), and (2) while bu occurs with preverbal adjuncts, it cannot cooccur with certain types of postverbal adjuncts: it is argued that postposing the latter from their base preverbal position leaves a trace which prevents bu from cliticizing, as it must. Evidence comes also from (3) the untenability of alternative analyses invoking scope or overt head movement. This analysis supports the views that morphological requirements of functional items may have important consequences for syntax and that the distribution of such items can be accounted for, in part, by ‘Affix Checking’, i.e., head movement at LF rather than in overt syntax.

1. Introduction

Scholars have long been concerned with the syntax of negation, both chronicling its cross-linguistic variety (e.g., Jesperson 1917, Zimmer 1964, Dahl 1979, Payne 1985) and using language-specific facts about negation to argue points of theory (such as Chomsky 1957, Klima 1964, Pollock 1989). This has been fruitful partly because negation often interacts with other grammatical phenomena in revealing ways; and with renewed interest in tense, agreement, aspect and other functional categories, negation is again providing insights into the properties of human language (e.g., Haegeman and Zanuttini 1991, Zanuttini 1991, Benmamoun 1992).

In this paper I examine negation in Mandarin Chinese, focusing on its interaction with aspect and manner modification. Most central is the inability of the negator bu ‘not’ to cooccur with perfective aspect markers, illustrated in (1):

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Wo chi-le mugua.
I eat-PRF papaya
I ate papaya.

Wo bu chi mugua.
I not eat papaya
I do not eat papaya.

*Wo bu chi-le mugua.

Wo mei-you chi mugua.
I not-PRF eat papaya
I didn’t eat papaya.

*Wo you chi mugua.

As (1c) shows, bu does not cooccur with the aspect marker le; negative perfective sentences are formed instead with the negator mei and the auxiliary you, as in (1d). (In standard Mandarin you cannot occur by itself as an auxiliary in the declarative, as in (1e).)

Negation also figures in the paradigm in (2), in combination with post-verbal manner adverbials, often called Descriptive Complements:¹

Ta jiang de (hen) qingchu.
he speak DE very clear
He speaks clearly.

*Ta bu jiang de (hen) qingchu.
he not speak DE very clear
He does not speak very clearly.

¹Some scholars (e.g., Chao 1968, Li and Thompson 1981, Tang 1990), including those writing in a traditional framework, distinguish preverbal Manner adverbials from the similar postverbal phrases (Descriptive Complements, Complex Stative Constructions, etc.). Given the analyses in McConnell-Ginet (1982), Ernst (1984), and others, however, it should be clear that such phrases are fundamentally manner expressions regardless of their position. This does not mean that they have identical semantics (see Ross 1984, Huang 1988, p. 292 for some discussion), only that their differences come from factors independent of whatever assigns a manner reading to them.